金庸

32 作品集

鹿鼎記

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This is a fan translation of Jin Yong's last book, The Deer and the Cauldron (Lu Ding Ji). In translating this story, I am making a conscious effort to stick as close as possible to theoriginal Chinese text (even more so that my previous works), for two reasons:

1. To distance this work as far as possible from existing work,

2. To save time, since I do not have to think too much about the proper English equivalent of the words.

Therefore, the names, titles, and especially curse words (which, surprisingly, Jin Yong used a lot in this book) are kept in their original forms, or translated literally. Those of you who are used to Hollywood-style cussing may find it sounds a bit strange. The only exception is 'tamade' [他妈的], which I translate as 'damn it'. I even keep the units of measurement in their original form, with modern day equivalent in footnote. For the same reason, I apologize for grammatically-inaccurate and other sounds-rather-strange sentences.

WARNING: This story is for mature audience for violence, rape and foul language.

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Chapter 1

Crooked bunch went on a rampage courting disaster, discussing early morning moon during high wind.

(Translated by Foxs)

The scholar rushed to the bow of the boat, he picked up the bamboo pole for punting boats, and hurled it out. Under the moonlight the bamboo pole appeared like a flying snake, as it was shooting forward. "Ahhh!" they heard Gua Guandai let out a long scream. The bamboo pole pierced his back, and nailed him to the ground. The pole did not stopped swaying.

Northern wind as sharp as a blade, ice and frost covered the earth.

Along a Jiangnan [area south of the River, *i.e.* Yangtze] coastal road, a company of Qing troops with sabers and spears in their hands was escorting seven prisoner carriages, braving the wind and the cold as they travelled northward. The first three carriages in the front separately held three men, all dressed as scholars. One was an old man with white hair, the other two were middle-aged men. The four carriages on the rear held women, the very last prisoner carriage held a young woman, holding a baby girl in her bosom. The baby was crying incessantly. Her mother comforted her with tender voice, but the baby kept crying loudly. A Qing soldier by the prisoner carriage got angry, he lifted his leg and kicked the carriage.

"Keep crying, keep crying," he shouted, "*Laozi*[1] will kick you dead!" The baby was scared, she cried even louder.

There was a big house several dozen *zhang* [unit of length, approximately 10 ft or 3 m], away from the road; under the eaves of the house stood a middle-aged scholar and a boy about eleven or twelve. Seeing this situation, he could not help heaving a deep sigh, his eyes also turned red as he said, "Have mercy, have mercy!"

"*Die die* [pronounced 'dee-eh' – Dad]," the boy asked, "What crime have they committed?"

"What crime have they committed?" the scholar echoed, "Yesterday and this morning they already arrested more than thirty people, all are our Zhejiang's famous intellectuals, each and every one is innocent and is only guilty by association." When he said the four words 'innocent, guilty by association' [wu gu zhu lian], he lowered his voice considerably, afraid that the officers and men escorting the prisoner carriages would hear it.

The boy said, “That little baby girl is still sucking the breast, could it be that she also committed the same crime? Really does not make any sense.”

The scholar said, “You understand that the officers and men do not make any sense, you are a really good child. Ay, others are the sacrifical knife and altar, we are the fish and the meat; others are the [tree-legged] cauldron, we are the elk!”

“*Die*,” he boy said, “Just a few days ago you taught me that the phrase ‘others are the sacrifical knife and altar, we are the fish and the meat’ carries the meaning that other people behead, cut and massacre us. Others are the cutting cleaver, the hot iron plate, and we are the fish, the meat. These few words ‘Others are the cauldron, we are the elk’, is the meaning also more or less the same?”

“Exactly!” the scholar replied. Seeing the officers and men, along with the prisoner carriages have already far away, he pulled the boy’s hand and said, “It’s too windy outside, let us go back into the house.” Right away father and son entered the study room.

The scholar picked up a writing brush and dipped it into the ink, and then he wrote a character ‘deer’ on a piece of paper. He said, “This beast, the deer, although they are huge, their temper is extremely gentle, they only eat grass and leaves, they never harm other animals. When the fierce animals want to harm them, eat them, they can only run. If they cannot run, then they will be eaten by others.”

And then he wrote two more characters ‘zhu lu’ [pursue the deer, fig. to vie for supremacy], and said, “For this reason the ancients often used the deer as a metaphor of the world. Common people on the earth are all docile, good and honest; their allotted share in life is only to be bullied and slaughtered by others. The ‘History of Han Dynasty’ says, ‘Qin lost its deer, people all over the world chase after it.’ What it means is that

the Qin Dynasty lost the world, the heroes rose together, everybody fought over, finally Han Gaozu[2] defeated Chu Bawang [overlord/hegemon Chu], and thus he obtained this big and fat deer."

The boy nodded and said, "I understand. There is a novel talking about 'hunting deer in the central plain', the idea is that everybody struggle to become the Emperor."

The scholar was delighted; he nodded repeatedly. He drew a picture of a cauldron on the paper and said, "When people of old cooked their food, they did not use pot on the stove, but used this kind of three-legged cauldron, with firewood underneath it. When they caught a deer, they cooked it in the cauldron and ate it. Emperors and high-ranking officials were very cruel, if they did not like someone, they would say that man committed a crime and boiled him alive in the cauldron. There is a written account in the 'Record of the Grand Historian' about Lin Xiangru saying to the King of Qin, '*Chen* [I, your servant; a minister referring to himself when talking to a ruler] is aware that I have offended the Great King and deserve to be punished by death, *Chen* asks for a cauldron.' In other words, 'I deserve to die, just burn me to death in a cauldron!'"

The boy said, "The novel often says about 'to inquire of the cauldron'. This phrase seems to have more or less the same meaning as 'hunting deer in the central plain'."

"That's right," the scholar said, "King of Xia Yu collected metal from the nine divisions [of China during the earliest dynasties] and cast nine large cauldrons. At that time, the so-called 'metal' was actually copper. Each cauldron was cast with the names of the nine divisions and a map of the mountains and rivers. When later generations became the ruler of the world, they retained the nine cauldrons. 'Mr. Zuo's Annals' noted: 'Viscount of Chu inspected his troops at the Zhou border. The present King sent

the king's grandson Man to console Viscount Chu. Viscount Chu inquired the size and weight of the cauldron.' Only the ruler of the world can keep the nine cauldrons. The King of Chu was merely a feudal prince from the State of Chu, he inquired about the size and weight of the cauldron, it means he harbored intention to rebel, thinking of taking the King of Zhou's position for himself."

The boy said, "So 'inquiring of the cauldron' and 'pursuing the deer' means someone wanted to be the emperor. 'Not knowing to whom the deer falls' means not knowing who might become the emperor."

"Exactly," the scholar said, "Later on, 'inquiring of the cauldron' and 'pursuing the deer', four characters [wen ding, zhu lu] can also be used elsewhere, but the original idea was pointing especially to one who wanted to be the emperor." Speaking to this point, he sighed and said, "We, as common people, are always at the death's door. 'Not knowing to whom the deer falls' simply say that nobody knows who would kill the deer, but this deer is bound to die."

Finished speaking, he walked over to the window and looked out. He saw the sky was overcast, apparently it was going to snow. He sighed and said, "Why is *Laotianye* [God/Heaven] so heartless? Several hundred innocent people walk on this ice and frost covered earth, when the snow falls, it will add to their torment."

Suddenly he saw on the southern end of the main road two men wearing conical bamboo hat, walking side by side to this direction. When they were near, he could recognize their faces. The scholar was delighted; he said, "Your Huang *Bobo* [father's elder brother] and Gu *Bobo* are here!" Quickly he went outside to meet them; he called out, "Lizhou *Xiong* [brother, generic term], Tinglin *Xiong*, which good wind has blown the two of you to honor me with your presence?"

The man on the right was short and stout, his chin was covered in black beard; his surnamed was Huang, given name Zongxi, alias[3] Lizhou [lit. pear island], a native of Yuyao [county level city in Ningbo], Zhejiang. The one on the left was slim and tall, his face dark, surnamed Gu, given name Yanwu, alias Tinglin [lit. pavilion forest], a native of Kunshan [county level city, Suzhou], Jiangsu. Huang and Gu[4], two people were great scholars of the present age. After the Ming [dynasty] perished, their hearts were broken over the changes to their country, they went to live in seclusion and quit their official posts; this day they ‘join sleeves’ to uphold virtue.

Gu Yanwu walked several steps closer before saying, “Wancun [lit. evening village] *Xiong*, there is an urgent business we need to discuss with you.”

The scholar was surnamed Lu, given name Liuliang, his alias was Wancun; in all his life he resided in Chongde County of Hangzhou Prefecture, Zhejiang. He was also a very famous hermit in the late Ming, early Qing dynasties. He noticed Huang and Gu, two men’s grim countenance; he also knew that Gu Yanwu was always very adaptable and was always calm in facing anything; therefore, when he said it was urgent, naturally it was indeed not a small matter. Cupping his fist, he said, “Gentlemen, please come in and drink three cups first to dissolve the cold air.”

Immediately he took the two men inside and ordered the boy, “Baozhong, tell your *Niang* [mother], Huang *Bobo*, Gu *Bobo* are here; cut two dishes of lamb in paste first to down the wine.”

Shortly afterwards, the boy, Lu Baozhong and his brother Yizhong came out with three sets of cups and chopsticks and arranged them on the study room’s table. An old servant came out with the food and drink. Lu Liuliang waited until the three people withdrew before he closed the study room’s door and

said, “Huang *Xiong*, Gu *Xiong*, please drink three cups first!”

Huang Zongxi looked distressed; he shook his head. Gu Yanwu poured a drink for himself and downed six cups in one breath.

Lu Liuliang said, “Gentlemen came here this time, does it have something to do with the case of ‘History of the Ming Dynasty’?”

“Exactly!” Huang Zongxi said.

Gu Yanwu picked up the wine cup and loudly moaned, “’Although cool breeze is fine, it cannot blow me, why can’t the bright moon illuminate people?’ Wancun *Xiong*, this poem of yours is indeed the most perfect song! Everytime I drink wine, I always recite this poem, and I am always moved big time.”

Lu Liuliang always had the old country in his heart, he was unwilling to take official post with the Qing dynasty. Local high-ranking government officials admired his reputation and sponsored and recommended him as the ‘mountain hermit’, to be recruited as official of the imperial court. Lu Liuliang adamantly refused. The local official did not dare to force him. Later on another high-ranking official sponsored and recommended him as the ‘profound scholar’. Lu Liuliang saw that if ke kept refusing, it would appear that he was disparaging and insulting the imperial court; inevitably he would bring the disaster of execution upon himself. Thereupon he shaved his head to become a fake Buddhist monk. The local officials saw his determination and henceforth no longer urging him to ‘leave the mountain’.

The poem about ‘cool breeze, bright moon’ was to mock the Manchurian Qing [lit. clear/cool] and cherish to memory of former Ming [lit. bright]. Although he did not dare to have it printed and circulated, it spread far and wide among the like-minded friends and colleagues, and this moment Gu Yanwu recited it again.

“Really good poem!” Huang Zongxi said, as he picked up the wine cup and downed it in one gulp.

“Gentlemen praised wrongly.” Lu Liuliang said.

Gu Yanwu looked up and saw a scroll of painting hanging on the wall, about five *chi* [Chinese foot, approx. 1/3 of a meter] tall, and almost a *zhang* wide, a painting of a wide expanse of landscape. The brush stroke moved unhindered, the scene looked grand; he could not help but loudly shouted his praise. The painting only had four large characters on it, ‘ru ci jiang shan’ [lit. in this way the rivers and mountains; loosely translated: ‘this is our country’]. He said, “Looking at the brush stroke, it is Mr. Erzhan’s painting.”

“Exactly,” Lu Liuliang said. This ‘Erzhan’ was surnamed Zha, given name Shibao, a great painter of the late Ming, early Qing dynasties; he was also a good friend of Gu, Huang and Lu.

Huang Zongxi said, “This kind of good painting, how come there is no annotation?”

Lu Liuliang sighed and said, “This painting of Mr. Erzhan’s has a rather deep meaning. Only he is a very staid and prudent man; since he did not put any signature on it, he did not put any annotation either. He stayed in my humble abode last month, for a short while he was happy and painted this for me. How about the two gentlemen inscribe several sentences on it?”

Gu and Huang, two men stood up and walked over to have a closer look at the painting. They saw the grand river flowing expansively to the east, with countless ridges and peaks on both sides, sprinkled with wonderful trees and strange rock formations. Only the scenery was covered in a mist; although the mountains and the rivers were beautiful, there was a sense of dismal feeling deep in the hearts of the people who look at it.

Gu Yanwu said, “This beautiful land sinks into oblivion in the hands of barbarians. Our generation submit to humiliation and

live without purpose; it's really stuffing our breasts with grieve and indignation. Wancun *Xiong*, if it is not inconvenient, why don't you inscribe a poem to display Mr. Erzhan's meaning?"

"Alrght!" Lu Liuliang said. Immediately he took down the painting and spread it out on the table. Huang Zongxi ground the ink. Lu Liuliang pondered deeply for half a day, and then his brush started to dance on the painting. In a short time it was finished:

"Is it the Song (dynasty) crossing to the south? In this way the rivers and mountains are in disgrace. Is it after the cliff of the mountain? In this way the rivers and mountains cannot bear to be looked at. Only today I comprehend the meaning of the painting, weeping bitter tears seems the right thing to do. Because today I looked at former times just like now, swallowing my cries need not bridle my mouth. The painting spread on the table is a western platform for tears, delving deeply into the picture taking up my pen brightly and brilliantly. Therefore, a picture without poetry and literatture, poetry and literature being exhausted in just four characters. Once grew accustomed to come across the beginning of Hong Wu[5], as if undiscerning, ignorant pupil of the eye and the lame able to tread on. Mountains and rivers clear up, the former wall completed, how can looking at scenic place not bring ecstasy?"

The poem completed, he tossed the brush to the floor and burst into tears.

Gu Yanwu said, "Delightfully uninhibited. It is indeed an exquisitely good ballad."

"This poem is not subtle at all," Lu Liuliang said, "It can't be considered good, I was merely spelling out Mr. Erzhan's original idea, so that people who look at the painting may know."

Huang Zongxi said, "When the former country will repeat its light, that the 'mountains and rivers clear up, the former wall

completed’ part. Even thought it was full of barren hills and treacherous rapids, those who look at it will have their bosom greatly free; it is indeed ‘how can looking at scenic place not bring ecstasy?’”

Gu Yanwu said, “This poem is written very well! There will come a day when the barbarians will be driven out and taken captives, and our great Han’s mountains and rivers will be restored. Compared to believers like us pouring out grief and indignation, the people’s spirit will be even more strengthened.”

Huang Zongxi slowly rolled the painting and said, “This painting can’t be hung anymore, Wancun *Xiong* must hide it well. Supposing crafty scoundrel like Wu Zhirong saw it, the authorities will investigate, while admittedly Wancun *Xiong* will be inconvenienced, Mr. Erzhan will be weighed down as well.”

Gu Yanwu slapped the table and cursed, “That dog thief Wu Zhirong, I really wish I could eat his meat raw.”

Lu Liuliang said, “Gentlemen are neglecting the urgent matter you mentioned earlier. We, the scholars, fall into an old habit, composing poem and inscribing painting, and put aside proper business. I wonder what is it?”

Huang Zongxi said, “This time the two of us came, it was for the sake of Mr. Erzhan’s distant relative [of the same surname], Mr. Yihuang. The day before yesterday *Xiaodi* [little brother, referring to self] and Gu *Xiong* received news that in this big case of the ‘History of the Ming Dynasty’, unexpectedly Mr. Yihuang is also implicated.”

Lu Liuliang was alarmed. “Yihuang *Xiong* is implicated?” he asked.

“That’s right,” Huang Zongxi said, “The day before yesterday the two of us rushed toward Yuanhua town in Haining [county, Jiaxing, Zhejiang], but Mr. Yihuang was not home at all, they said he was out to visit a friend. Seeing the urgency of the

situation, Yanwu *Xiong* hastily urged Mr. Yihuang's household to go into hiding that very same night. Remembering Mr. Yihuang and Wancun *Xiong* are good friends, we came with the specific purpose to inquire of you."

Lu Liuliang said, "He … he did not come here. I don't know where he went."

Gu Yanwu said, "If he was in your respected residence, he would have come out already to meet us. I already inscribed a poem on the wall of his study room, if he came back home, he would have understood and hastened to go into hiding. What I am afraid of is that the did not hear the news and appeared in public, then the authority would arrest him; it would be terrible."

Huang Zongxi said, "In this case of the 'History of the Ming Dynasty', nearly all our western Zhejiang's famous scholars have met with evil scheme. The Qing court's intention is really vicious, Wancun *Xiong*'s fame is really too great, Tinglin *Xiong* and *Xiaodi*'s thought is that we want to urge Wancun *Xiong* to leave home and travel far for the time being, to take shelter from the wind."

Lu Liuliang indignantly said, "If the Tatar Emperor arrest me and take me to Beijing, I don't care if he makes mincemeat out of me, in any case I will be able to curse him a bit to vent this resentment in my chest, and then I'll die without a moment's hesitation."

Gu Yanwu said, "Wancun *Xiong*'s heroism reaching to the clouds, you make other people filled with admiration. I am afraid you will not see the Tatar Emperor but will die under some lowly slaves' hands. Furthermore, the Tatar Emperor is only a child, he doesn't understand anything, the political power of the imperial court is entirely in the powerful minister Oboi's hands. *Xiongdi* and Lizhou *Xiong* reckon that this time the case of the 'History of the Ming Dynasty' is exposed with great

fanfare, it passes like thunder and moves like the wind, it is because Oboi wants to dampen our Jiangnan scholars' spirit."

Lu Liuliang said, "Gentlemen's view is correct. Ever since the Qing troops entered the Pass, they went on the rampage in Jiangbei [area north of the River] unhindered, as soon as they came to Jiangnan, they encountered resistance everywhere, particularly the intellectuals who know how to guard against Chinese-Barbarian relationship, constantly giving them trouble. Oboi is seizing this opportunity to suppress us, Jiangnan scholars. Humph, even a prairie fire cannot destroy the grass, it grows again when the breeze blows; unless he wipes out us all, Jiangnan intellectuals."

"That's right," Huang Zongxi said, "For this reason we want to retain useful people to deal with the Tatars to the end. If we flaunt our blood and vital breath and show bravery for a period of time, we will fall prey to Tatars' scheme."

Lu Liuliang understood immediately, Huang and Gu two people braved the cold, one was to look for Zha Yihuang, two was to urge him to flee; they were afraid he might not be unable to hold back and thus would deliver his life in vain. Good friends made painstaking effort, he was deeply grateful. "Gentlemen's gems of wisdom, how can *Xiongdi* dare not to follow?" he said, "Early in the morning tomorrow *Xiongdi*'s entire family will leave."

Huang and Gu, two people were greatly delighted. "That is only proper," they both said.

Lu Liuliang hesitantly said, "But I don't know where should I go?" He felt that in the boundless horizon, everywhere was the Tatars' world; there was really not a single clean soil. "Where is Taoyuan [the Garden of the Peaches of Immortality] that I can escape from cruel Qin? Where is Taoyuan that I can escape from cruel Qin?" he muttered irresolutely.

Gu Yanwu said, “In the world today, if there really exists Taoyuan paradise, we still cannot liberate ourselves and go into hiding …”

Without waiting for him to finish, Lu Liuliang slapped the table and stood up; he said in a loud voice, “Tinglin *Xiong*’s reprimand this time is so true, the rise and fall of the nation concerns everyone, we can temporarily flee from disaster, but if we hide in Peach Flower Garden, freely and leisurely, while the millions and millions common people suffer under the Tatars’ iron hoof, how can our hearts be at peace? *Xiongdi* has a slip of the tongue.”

Gu Yanwu smiled and said, “In recent years *Xiongdi* has roamed far and wide, I indeed make not a few friends. On both sides of the Great River, as far as I can see and hear, not only the intellectuals are opposing the Tatars, even peddlers and carriers, butchers and marketplace people, everywhere people’s hearts are filled with hot blooded heroic spirit. If Wancun *Xiong* so desires, the three of us can go to Yangzhou together. How about *Xiongdi* introduce you to several kindred spirits?”

Lu Liuliang was greatly delighted. “Wonderful, wonderful!” he exclaimed, “Tomorrow all of us are going to Yangzhou. Gentlemen please sit back and relax, *Xiongdi* is going to inform my humble wife, let her pack.” Finished speaking he hurried inside.

Shortly afterwards Lu Liuliang returned to the study room and said, “About the case of the ‘History of the Ming Dynasty’, although there are rumors everywhere on the outside, but one, rumors are not necessarily true, two, people are in a lot of apprehensions, they do not dare to speak everything openly. *Xiongdi* lives alone in a snail’s home, I do not know the details; what exactly was the cause?”

Gu Yanwu sighed and said, “This book the ‘History of the Ming Dynasty’, all of us have seen it. The content is not too

respectful toward the Tatars, that much is true. This book originated from our Great Ming's Prime Minister Zhu Guozhen's hands. Speaking about establishing an administrative division outside the Pass; how can it be polite toward the Tatars?"

Lu Liuliang nodded and said, "I heard the Zhuang family of Huzhou has spent several thousand *taels* of silver to buy the 'History of the Ming Dynasty' manuscript from Prime Minister Zhu's later generations' hands to be published; unexpectedly it brewed this kind of catastrophe."

Western Zhejiang's Hangzhou, Jiaxing, and Huzhou, three prefectures were located on the bank of Lake Tai, the land was flat, the soil fertile, abound in rice and natural silk. Huzhou prefecture's principal county magistrate is known as Wuxing County today, during the Qing dynasty, it was divided into Wu Cheng and Gui An, two counties. From the beginning its literary style was extremely flourishing, people of talents and scholars of successive generations came forth in large numbers. During the Liang period, Shen Yue [441-513, writer and historian] divide the Chinese characters into four tones, namely level or even tone, third tone, fourth tone and entering tone. During the Yuan era, painting and calligraphy reached its best quality in Zhao Mengfu's work. These were all Huzhou natives. Writing brush produced locally was well-known; Huzhou's writing brush, Huizhou's ink, Xuancheng's paper, and Zhaoqing Duanxi's [lit. end/extremity creek of Zhaoqing] ink-stone were famous all over the world as the 'Four Treasures of the Study'.

There was a city in Huzhou prefecture called Nanxun. Although it was a small town, it was bigger than ordinary county capitals. There were a lot of rich families in town, among the famous rich families and big clans, there was one family by the surname of Zhuang. By this time the head of the Zhuang household was called Zhuang Yuncheng. He had several sons; the oldest was called Tinglong, who loved literature since his

childhood, and had made quite a number of friends among famous and gifted scholars of Jiangnan. During the Shunzhi years [second Qing emperor, 1644-1662], due to excessive reading, Zhuang Tinglong suddenly went blind. Famous doctors were searched, but no one was able to cure him; since then he grew melancholy and was depressed.

One day suddenly a young man surnamed Zhu from their neighborhood came with a manuscript, saying that it was his paternal grandfather, Prime Minister Zhu's bequeathed draft that he wanted to mortgage to the Zhuang family, begging to borrow several hundred *taels* of silver. The Zhuang family was usually generous; they always showed consideration to Prime Minister Zhu's later generations. Since he came to borrow money, they agreed immediately, without asking any surviving manuscript as collateral. But the young man surnamed Zhu said that after receiving the money, he was going on a journey to a distant land; if he carried his ancestor's manuscript with him, he was afraid it would get lost, while he did not feel at ease to leave it at home, therefore, he wanted to keep it in the Zhuang family. Zhuang Yuncheng agreed.

After the young man surnamed Zhu left, to relieve his son's boredom, Zhuang Yuncheng had the guests who settled in his house[6] to read it aloud to him. For the most part, Zhu Guozhen's manuscript of the 'History of the Ming Dynasty' had been published and was widely available. This time the manuscript that his grandson brought to the Zhuang family to be mortgaged was actually the last of many articles of historical biography.

After listening to the guest [see footnote] reading for several days, Zhuang Tinglong was very interested. Suddenly he remembered, "In the past Zuo Qiuming [556-451 BC], who was also a blind man, was able to write 'Mr. Zuo's Annals' and hence enjoy the benefit of great name for a thousand years. Today I

am blind and bored of staying idle at home, why not composing a history book to be circulated to the later generations?”

For rich families, everything was easy. Since he had the desire to do this, immediately he hired quite a few scholars to have the ‘History of the Ming Dynasty’ manuscript read to him from top to bottom. He considered which section needed to be expanded, and which section needed to be deleted; he recounted his thought orally and had the guests write it down. However, thinking that being blind he was incapable to extensively examine the written record, when this ‘History of the Ming Dynasty’ was finished and published, if there were a lot of errors in it, not only he would not enjoy the fame, he might be ridiculed instead. Thereupon he spent large quantities of money to employ many scholars who knew this subject very well, to amend and revise, to research this subject and bring the book to perfection. Some of the great scholars were people who could not be invited with wealth, Zhuang Tinglong passed this matter through many hands and humbly invited them. The banks of Lake Tai were always teeming with literary scholars, those who received the Zhuang family’s invitation, on one hand they took pity of the blind and was touched by his sincerity, on the other hand they believed that compiling the ‘History of the Ming Dynasty’ was a beautiful thing. Most of them stayed in the Zhuang family’s home for ten days or half a month to work on the manuscript; some correcting the errors, some adding notes or even one or two sections. For this reason the ‘History of the Ming Dynasty’ was definitely a collective power of not a few writing brushes of many great hands. Not long after the book was completed, Zhuang Tinglong passed away.

Grief-stricken by his beloved son’s death, Zhuang Yuncheng immediately published the book. Publishing books during the Qing dynasty was really not easy, one must recruit artisans to engrave wood blocks one by one before printing the book. This book ‘History of the Ming Dynasty’ was voluminous, the cost to

hire the engravers and the printers was considerable. Fortunately the Zhuang family had plenty of money, they set aside several large houses as factories and invited many artisans. Several years later the books and publications were completed.

The book was titled ‘Compilation of Ming Documents’, with Zhuang Tinglong listed as the compiler, famous scholar Li Lingxi was asked to write the preface. All scholars who have helped with this project were also listed: Mao Yuanxi, Wu Zhiming, Wu Zhirong [different characters from Wu Zhirong mentioned by Huang Zongxi and Gu Yanwu above], Li Qitao, Mao Cilai, Wu Chu, Tang Yuanlou, Yan Yunqi, Jiang Linzhi, Wei Jinyou, Wei Yiyuan, Zhang Juan, Dong Eryou, Wu Yan, Pan Chengzhang, Lu Qi, Zha Jizuo, Fan Xiang; eighteen people altogether. The book also mentioned that the content was based on Zhu clan’s manuscript, which was expanded and deleted. However, Zhu Guozhen was a prime minister of the Ming Dynasty, his fame was too great, it was unsuitable to mention his full name; therefore, it was mentioned vaguely as ‘Zhu Clan’s manuscript’.

Having undergone so many scholars composing, verifying and revising, the ‘Compilation of Ming Documents’ had a very exquisite style, its coverage was comprehensive and clear, the script was magnificent, the layout was in good taste; its publication has garnered praise from literary community. The Zhuang family’s aspiration was to become famous, the books were sold at a very inexpensive price.

When the manuscript touched upon Manchuria, there were originally not a few of criticism and exposures of past misdeeds, which the editors had already deleted one by one, but sentences showing approval to the Ming Dynasty were inevitable. At that time the Ming had not fallen for too long, the intellectuals still cherished the memory of their former country; as soon as the book went into publication, it immediately

reached best-seller status, Zhuang Tinglong's name was buzzing north and south of the Great River. Despite the pain of the death of his son, seeing his son became famous after his death, Zhuang Yuncheng's old heart was greatly comforted.

Troubled times are when lowly people accomplish their ambition, while people of noble character meet calamity. The county head magistrate of Huzhou's Gui An County was one surnamed Wu, given name Zhirong, who committed corruption and abuse of the law during his tenure. Common people gnashed their teeth in anger toward him, eventually someone lodged an accusation and the imperial court had him deposed.

Although when he was the county head magistrate of Gui An, Wu Zhirong raked in more than ten thousand *taels*, during the court proceeding and investigation of his disposal, he bribed to the east and sent a gift to the west, spending money everywhere to avoid being searched and his possession confiscated, these ten thousand *taels* booty were obliterated completely, even the people in his household left him, their whereabouts unknown.

With his official post and his wealth gone, he had no choice but to go from house to house to seek gratuitous financial help, saying that he was a just and honest official who had fallen hard and lost his post, that he did not even have enough travel expenses and was incapable of embarking on the journey home. Some rich people simply wanted to avoid trouble and gave him ten *taels* or eight *taels*. When he got to the rich Zhu family, the master of the home, Zhu Youming was an upright person of noble character who shunned evil. Not only he did not give him anything, he ruthlessly derided Wu Zhirong, saying that Sire took an official post in Huzhou, you have caused common people a great deal of hardship; even if I, the Ol' Zhu, have some money, I would rather donate it to the poor people who suffer under Sire's administration.

Although Wu Zhirong was enraged, he was incapable of lashing it out. Since he was already deposed, he had no power and no influence; how could he take a case against a rich and powerful family? Thereupon he paid a visit to Zhuang Yuncheng. Zhuang Yuncheng usually made friends with impoverished scholars, but he looked down upon corrupt official like this. Seeing his arrival and request, he laughed coldly and gave him a *tael* of silver, saying, "Based on Sire's conduct, I should not have given you this *tael*, but common people of Huzhou are hoping Sire would leave, the sooner the better. If this *tael* can hasten your departure just a moment sooner, then it will be good."

In his heart Wu Zhirong was extremely angry. Taking a glance he saw a copy of the 'Compilation of Ming Documents' lying on a table in the main hall; he thought, "This man surnamed Zhuang loves to hear flattery, as long as people praise this Ming History as such and such good, he will present shining white silver with both hands, no more knitting of his brows." Thereupon he laughed and said, "Something that old gentleman Zhuang generously bestows, refusing it would be impolite. Today *Xiongdi* will leave Huzhou, what I regret the most is that I am not able to bring 'Huzhou treasures' with me, so that ignorant and inexperienced people of my humble hometown may greatly broaden their horizons."

Zhuang Yuncheng asked, "What are 'Huzhou treasures'?"

Wu Zhirong laughed and said, "Old gentleman Zhuang is too modest. Among the literary community, everybody says that your esteemed son, Tinglong *Gongzi* [young master] has personally composed that book the 'Compilation of Ming Documents'. In terms of historical talent, historical knowledge, historical composition, not a single one is not a rarity since the dawn of time. Zuo Ma Ban Zhuang, those are ancient and modern times' four great historical experts. This 'Huzhou

treasure’ is naturally the book ‘History of the Ming Dynasty’ your esteemed son personally composed.”

Hearing Wu Zhirong mentioned ‘your esteemed son personally composed’ in the front, another ‘your esteemed son personally composed’ at the end, Zhuang Yuncheng was bursting with joy. He was fully aware that this book was not really composed by his son, inevitably there was regret in the deepest part of his heart. By saying those words, Wu Zhirong had thrown himself in a favorable light. Zhuang Yuncheng thought, “People are saying that this man is greedy of bribes, is a dirty lowly person, but he is, after all, a scholar; contrary to what one might expect, he has some perspective. Turns out people on the outside call Long’er’s [‘dear Long’, referring to Zhuang Tinglong, term of endearment] book a ‘Huzhou treasure’. This is the first time I have ever heard it.” He could not refrain smile from appearing across his face. He said, “Old gentlemen Rong mentioned something about Zuo Ma Ban Zhuang, four great historical experts of ancient and modern times; *Xiongdi* does not understand, would you please give your advice?”

Seeing his expression softened considerably, Wu Zhirong knew his flattery had hit the target; he was secretly delighted. “Old gentleman Zhuang is rather too modest. Zuo Qiuming wrote ‘Mr. Zuo’s Annals’, Sima Qian [145-86 BC] wrote ‘Record of the Grand Historian’, Ban Gu [32-92] wrote ‘History of the Former Han Dynasty’. These are all widely-known masterpiece, which garnered thousand praises. After Ban Gu, there was no more great historian. Ouyang Xiu [1007-1072] wrote ‘History of the Five Dynasties’, Sima Guang [1019-1086] wrote ‘A mirror for the wise ruler’ [or ‘Comprehensive Mirror for aid in Government’]; although the writing was fine, in the end the ability and insight is rather lacking. Until our Great Qing’s flourishing period, your esteemed son personally composed this brilliant masterpiece ‘Compilation of Ming Documents’, which people say can run neck to neck with Zuo Qiuming, Sima Qian

and Ban Gu, three *qianbei* [older generation], as the ‘four great historical experts’. The term ‘Zuo Ma Ban Zhuang’ came from this fact.”

With smiling expression across his face, Zhuang Yuncheng repeatedly cupped his fist and said, “Erroneous praise, erroneous praise! However, this term ‘Huzhou treasure’ is, after all, not worthy to be mentioned.”

With serious expression Wu Zhirong said, “What do you mean not worthy to be mentioned? People outside are saying, ‘Huzhou treasures are history, silk and writing brush’; isn’t Zhuang’s history ranked to be the first?”

Natural silk and writing brush were two famous products of Huzhou, although Wu Zhirong’s character was contemptible, he was still somewhat talented, and was able to speak like a printed book; he lumped ‘Zhuang History’ together with Huzhou’s silk and Huzhou’s writing brush, hearing it, Zhuang Yuncheng was even more delighted.

Wu Zhirong continued, “*Xiongdi* came to your precious place to take an official post, both sleeves flowing in the breeze [i.e. having clean hands/uncorrupted], gaining nothing. Today I am wearing my old face to ask Old gentleman Zhuang a copy of the ‘History of the Ming Dynasty’, to be passed on as my family treasure. Someday my Wu family’s offsprings will read it day and night, certainly their imaginative power will greatly increased, they will bring honor to their ancestors. I am hoping for Old gentleman Zhuang’s generosity in bestowing one.”

Zhuang Yuncheng laughed and said, “Naturally I can give one as a present.”

Wu Zhirong talked several more sentences, but did not see Zhuang Yuncheng was about to take any action. Thereupon he launched another speech, giving great compliments to the ‘History of the Ming Dynasty’. Actually, he had not even read

one page of the book; therefore, how amazing this history book was, how beyond understanding the writing of this history book was, everything was not to the point, he merely talked drivel.

Zhuang Yuncheng said, “Old gentleman Rong, please sit back and relax.” And then he went into the inner hall.

After a good while, a manservant came out, holding a bundle with both hands, and put it down on the table. Seeing Zhuang Yuncheng did not come out, Wu Zhirong hurriedly weighed the bundle in his hand. Although the bundle was big, it was as light as a feather, apparently it contained no silver; in his heart he was quite disappointed.

Shortly afterwards, Zhuang Yuncheng returned to the main hall, he presented the bundle with both hands and said with a laugh, “Old gentleman Rong thinks much of our local products; hence I sincerely present this to you.”

Wu Zhirong thanked him and took his leave. Before he was even back at the inn, he reached into the bundle and groped around. What he found was one book, a bundle of natural silk, and several dozen of writing brushes. He wasted a lot of words, the idea was that other than the ‘History of the Ming Dynasty’ book, Zhuang Yuncheng would also give several hundred *taels* of silver, but the gifts were unexpectedly the crazy nonsense he invented, the so-called ‘Huzhou Three Treasures’. He cursed in his heart, “Damn it, these moneybags of Nanxun are all this stingy! But I did say the wrong thing; if I said the ‘Huzhou Three Treasures’ are gold, silver and the ‘History of the Ming Dynasty’, wouldn’t I have reaped great harvest?”

Still fuming, he returned to the inn and tossed the bundle to the table, and then he put his head down and slept. When he woke up, it was already dark, the inn’s dinnertime had passed. He did not want to order special dinner; with anxiety and hunger burning, he was tortured on both sides, and could not return to sleep. Thereupon he untied the bundle, opened up the

‘Compilation of Ming Documents’, and started to read.

After reading several pages, he saw a glimmer of gold, a sheet of golden leaf suddenly appeared. Wu Zhirong’s heart was thumping wildly, he rubbed his eyes; but what was it if not a golden leaf? Trembling with excitement he shook the book and ten golden leaves came out, each sheet was at least five *qian* [1/10 of a *tael*], ten sheets of golden leaves equal to five *tael* of gold. At that time gold was precious, five *taels* of gold worth four hundred *taels* of silver. Wu Zhirong was unable to contain his joy; he thought, “This surnames Zhuang is indeed very sly, he is afraid that after getting this book I would casually toss it aside and would not even flip a single page, thereupon he hid golden leaves among the pages, so that those who read his son’s book would have the good fortune of finding the golden leaves. Right, I am going to read several sections, tomorrow I will drop in again, both to express my thanks for the gold, and to recite several paragraphs from the book, heap some more praise on it. If he is happy, maybe he would give me several more *taels* of gold.”

Thereupon he trimmed the oil lamp and flipped the pages to read. When he reached Emperor Wanli’s [1573-1619] fortieth year, the Later Jin dynasty’s *Taizu* [Great Ancestor, founder of a dynasty] Nurhachi succeeded the throne, the title of current dynasty was changed to Jin, establishing the primary ‘Mandate of Heaven’, suddenly his heart shivered, “Our *Taizu* establishing the primary in the year *bingchen* [53rd year of the 60-year cycle, *i.e.* 1616]. From that year on, we should not use Ming Dynasty’s Wanli era name anymore; it should be the Great Jin Mandate of Heaven’s primary year [first year of emperor’s reign].”

Thumbing through the book, he saw the *dingmao* [4th year of 60-year cycle, *i.e.* 1627] year of Later Jin’s *Taizu* on the throne,

the book still said 'Ming's Tianqi[7] Emperor's seventh year', and not 'Great Jin's Tiancong's first year'. In the *bingzi* [13th year of 60-year cycle, *i.e.* 1636] year, Later Jin changed the title of the dynasty to Qing, and changed the Emperor's reign title to Chongde. The book still said 'Chongzhen's ninth year', and not 'Great Qing's Chongde's first year'. In the *jiashen* [21st year of 60-year cycle, *i.e.* 1644] year, the book said 'Chongzhen seventeenth year', and not 'Great Qing's Shunzhi's first year'. Also, he could see that after the Qing troops entered the Pass, the book mention the *yiyou* [22nd year of 60-year cycle, *i.e.* 1645] year as 'Longwu's first year', the year *dinghai* [24th year of 60-year cycle, *i.e.* 1647] was called 'Yongli's first year'. Longwu and Yongli were Ming Dynasty's King Tang and King Gui's era names, the authors of the book plainly called them 'Ming Dynasty' still, they did not consider the Qing Dynasty at all.

Reading to this point, he could not help slapping the table and shouted, "Rebellion, rebellion, this is an outrage!" This slap had caused the table to shake, the oil lamp fell down, the oil splashed his hand, as well as the lapel of his robe. In the dark, suddenly a bright idea occurred; he could not help feeling crazy with joy, "Isn't this *Laotianye* giving me easy money? I can be promoted and gain wealth, all because of this."

Thinking about this, he could not help shouting in joy. Suddenly he heard the inn worker banged the door, "Mister guest, mister guest, what happened?"

Wu Zhirong laughed and said, "Nothing!" Lighting the oil lamp, he flipped through the book again. He read all night until the rooster crowed in the morning, before he finally took off his clothes and went to bed. He found about seventy or eighty taboo words in the book, so that even in his dream he could not help giggling and laughing.

When dynasties changed, the current political ruler paid most attention to correct the era name. The biggest taboo was in speech and in writings, since the implication was that the people were still thinking about the previous dynasty. The narrative in the ‘Compilation of Ming Documents’ was about the Ming Dynasty, there was actually nothing out of ordinary of the usage of era name and calendar of the Ming Dynasty. However, during the time when it was a taboo, it could bring enormous disaster. Most of the scholars who participated in writing the history book only helped with several sections, they could not be expected to go through the entire book, while those who compiled the last few sections were the ones who hated the Qing Dynasty to the bones, naturally they would not be willing to use the Great Qing’s era names in the book. Zhuang Tinglong was a young master of a rich family, plus he was blind, unavoidably he was rather careless, so that in the end a lowly person was able to seize the opportunity to exploit the loopholes.

By noon the next day, Wu Zhirong took a boat to Hangzhou on the east. In the inn he wrote a report, which he delivered, along with the History of the Ming Dynasty, to General Songkui’s mansion. He expected that when Songkui received the report, he would be summoned for an interview. At that time the Manchurian Qing used to give generous reward to people who report treasons. By rendering this great merit, Wu Zhirong was expecting his former official post to be reinstated, perhaps he could even enjoy three grades promotion as well. Who would have thought that after waiting left and right at the inn, all the way to more than half a year, every day he went to the general’s mansion to make discreet inquiries, it was as if he had thrown a stone and saw it sank without a trace in the ocean? Later on even the doorkeeper reprimanded him severely and did not allow him to drop in and create a disturbance at the door anymore.

Wu Zhirong was extremely anxious; he was about to exhaust the money he obtained by exchanging the golden leaves Zhuang Yuncheng gave him, yet the accusation did not give him the least bit of result. He was distressed, but was also astonished. One day he wandered around the city of Hangzhou and happened to stroll by the door of Wen Tong Tang [lit. literary expert hall] bookstore. He walked in to browse and kill the long day. Seeing three copies of ‘Compilation of Ming Documents’ on the shelf, he thought, “Could it be that the faults I found in the book are not enough to indict Zhuang Yuncheng? I’d better find some more treason and heresy writings and tomorrow write another report and deliver it to the general’s mansion.”

The inspector-general of Zhejiang at that time was a Han, but the general was a Manchu. He was afraid the inspector-general would not be willing to prosecute this literary case, hence he made up his mind to lodge the accusation to the Manchurian general.

He opened the book and only read several pages, and could not help but jumped in fright; he felt as if his entire body had just entered an icehouse. Momentarily he felt like stupid monk, unable to make any sense of the matter. He saw all the offending texts had disappeared completely from the book, from the Great Qing *Taizu* onward, the book used the Great Jin, Great Qing’s era name and calendar. As for exposing Jianzhou Guardian Commander-in-chief’s faults (a relative to the Manchurian Qing Emperor’s ancestor), as well as any reference to Longwu, Yongli, and others’ era name, not even a single character was left. But the text was strung together, the pages were clean, there was not a single trace of any alteration. How did they conjure this magic trick? It was indeed very strange.

Holding the book in his hands inside the bookstore, he stared blankly as if he was entranced for half a day. And then he

suddenly cried out, “That’s it!” He saw the cover and the pages of this book were spotlessly white and looked brand new; when he asked the shopkeeper, as expected, the books were new delivery, sent from Huzhou book distributor, arrived not even seven or eight days ago. He said in his heart, “This Zhuang Yuncheng is really formidable! Indeed money can reach anything. He pulled the books back, redid the engraving, and printed another set of new books, removing all the taboo in the original edition. Humph, do you think I will drop it just like that?”

Wu Zhirong’s guess was indeed not wrong. What happened was that Hangzhou general Songkui did not know Chinese characters, when the administrative secretary saw Wu Zhirong’s report, he was so scared that cold sweats broke on his entire body; he knew that the implication of this matter was very grave, without realizing it, his hands holding the report did not stop trembling.

This secretary was surnamed Cheng, given name Weifan, a native of Shaoxing [prefecture], Zhejiang. During Ming and Qing dynasties, eight or nine out of ten aids and advisors to top feudal officials were Shaoxing natives, therefore, often times two characters ‘Shaoxing’ were added in front of the word ‘secretary’, became ‘Shaoxing secretary’ [i.e. experts in legal briefs]. These secretaries first learned the trade secret from their hometown former generations, afterwards, they would be very experienced and careful in handling criminal law, money and grain. All documents in the feudal office were handled by these secretaries. Since they all were from the same town, documents prepared by low ranking administrative assistants to be presented to their superior in *yamen*[8] seldom met with nitpicking criticism. As a result, when new officials, big and small, took office, the most urgent business was to employ the service of a Shaoxing secretary. During Ming and Qing

dynasties, the number of Shaoxing natives who became high-ranking officials was really not many, yet they held control over numerous government affairs in China for several hundred years; they could be considered a marvel in Chinese political history.

This Cheng Weifan was honest and considerate, he believed in ‘religious practice in public life’. That is to say that the feudal officials grasped the life-and-death power over common people, the several characters drafted by the secretaries were serious, it could cause common people’s family bankrupt and the people dead, it could justify or condemn, it could help people to escape alive from mortal danger. Consequently, helping people in public office was more effective than performing religious practice in the temple. He saw that if this case of ‘History of the Ming Dynasty’ led to investigation, countless people in southern Jiangsu and western Zhejiang would lose their lives and had their families destroyed. Thereupon he asked for several days off from the general, and left that very same night by boat to Nanxun town in Huzhou, and informed Zhuang Yuncheng about this matter.

Suddenly faced with imminent catastrophe, Zhuang Yuncheng’s soul flew to the outer sky, he was so scared that his whole body went weak, his saliva trickled down his chin, he was completely at a loss. After a long while he finally stood up, bent his knees and kowtowed to Cheng Weifan to express his gratitude, afterwards he asked for advice.

During his journey from Hanzhou to Nanxun, Cheng Weifan had already gone through this matter over and over, and he thought of a good plan. Since the book ‘Compilation of Ming Documents’ had been in circulation for quite a while, they could not conceal it; they had to take drastic measures to deal with this situation: while sending people to book shops everywhere to purchase these books back and destroyed them completely,

they had to hasten day and night to engrave new printing blocks, delete all the taboo phrases and print new books, and sell them outside. If the authorities investigated this matter, they would look into the new edition, and would discover that Wu Zhirong's accusation was unsubstantiated; hence they would put an end to this unexpected calamity.

Immediately they put this plan into action. Zhuang Yuncheng was frightened but happy at the same time, he repeatedly kowtowed to say thanks. Cheng Weifan also taught him quite a bit of urgent matters, how to give a present to government official so-and-so, how to clear away obstruction and communicated with such-and-such *yamen*, et cetera. Zhuang Yuncheng diligently did everything.

Cheng Weifan returned to Hangzhou. He waited more than half a month before transferring the original book, along with Wu Zhirong's report, to the inspector-general of Zhejiang, Zhu Changzuo. He downplayed the report, saying that the submitter was a deposed county head magistrate due to corruption, who appeared to hold a grudge and hence blowing his whistle to vent his resentment, asking *Futai* [inspector-general] *Daren*[9] to investigate in details.

While Wu Zhirong painstakingly waited for news in an inn in Hangzhou, Zhuang Yuncheng's money flowed out like water. By this time Zhuang Yuncheng's heavy bribery had already reached the general's *yamen*, inspector-general's *yamen*, and literary office *yamen*. Upon receiving this case, Zhu Changzuo thought that this kind of publication matter belonged to the literary office; after another ten-day delay, he transferred the documents to Hu Shangheng of the literary office. Literary office *yamen*'s secretary put it on the shelf for more than half a month, and then he took another month sick leave, before finally slowly he drafted the official document and sent it to Huzhou prefecture.

In the Huzhou prefecture office, the case sat for more twenty days before it was passed on to Gui An and Wu Cheng counties' literature offices, asking these offices to respond. The two literary offices had already received Zhuang Yuncheng's bribe, by this time the new edition of 'History of the Ming Dynasty' had been printed. The two officers handed over the new edition to their superior with this report: 'The book is mediocre and is of low quality, it will not help the ways of the world or the heart of human being in any way. We have gone through the entire book and did not find any taboo or offending words.' And thus by stretching and delaying the matter was settled by leaving it unsettled.

It was not until he found the new edition of 'History of the Ming Dynasty' in the book store that Wu Zhirong found out the inside story. He thought if only he could find the original edition of the 'History of the Ming Dynasty' he would be able to re-expose this case. In all the book stores in Hangzhou the original edition had been bought back by the Zhuang family, thereupon he went to remote counties in eastern Zhejiang trying to find it; who would have thought that even there he failed to find a single copy? Destitute and troubled, he had no choice but to return home dejectedly.

As chance has it, along his journey home, he stopped by an inn, where he saw the innkeeper was swaying his head while reading a book. When he looked at the cover, it was indeed a copy of 'Compilation of Ming Documents'. He asked to borrow the book, and found out that it was unexpectedly the original edition. He was overjoyed at unexpected good news, and thought that if he wanted to buy it from the innkeeper, on one hand he might not be willing to sell, on the other hand Wu Zhirong did not have any money, he could not afford it anyway. Without any better option, he had to steal.

In the middle of the night he quietly got out of bed, stole the

book, and slipped out of the inn. Thinking that in the whole province of Zhejiang all government officials had received Zhuang Yuncheng's bribe, he had to either give up, or go through to the end; hence he might as well go to Beijing to report this case.

Upon his arrival in Beijing, Wu Zhirong wrote the report and sent it to the Ministry of Rites, the Capital Investigative Bureau, and the General Secretary Office, three *yamen*. He explained how the Zhuang family bribed local officials and published the new edition by altering the printing. Unexpectedly, in just less than a month one after another all three *yamen* refuted his claim. They all stated that Zhuang Tinglong's 'Compilation of Ming Documents' has been investigated carefully and the content did not have any taboo in it, the deposed county head magistrate Wu Zhirong's report was not based on truth, obviously he held a grudge and has accused someone falsely. As for the government officials received bribes and so on, it was chasing the wind and clutching at shadows, groundless accusations that should be dismissed.

The General Secretary Office's rebuttal was even more severe; it said, "The deposed county head magistrate Wu Zhirong is corrupt and hence was expelled from office, thereupon he considers all honest and upright officials in the world as corrupt as he is." Turned out Zhuang Yuncheng had received Cheng Weifan's instruction and had early on sent the new edition of 'History of the Ming Dynasty' to the Ministry of Rites, the Capital Investigative Bureau, and the General Secretary Office, three *yamen*; he had also sent generous gifts to the officers and secretaries in charge of this matter.

Once again Wu Zhirong had bumped into a wall; he had no travel expensed to return home, and was wandering destitute in a place far from home. At that time the Qing court treatment of Han intellectuals was extremely strict, if they found the

slightest bit of taboo in their writings, they would be immediately put to death. If Wu Zhirong's accusation was against an ordinary scholar, he would have succeeded early on; it's just happened that his opponent was a very rich and powerful family that he was thwarted again and again. Since he had no way to retreat, even if he risked imprisonment, he simply must continue this case to the end. Thereupon he wrote four reports to be sent separately to the four Advisroy Board Ministers; while in the inn he simultaneously writing several hundred accusation letters exposing this matter and posted the letters everywhere in the city of Beijing. This was a very risky move, since if the authorities decided to investigate, he might be charged with spreading frightening words to scare people, trying to disturb the people's mind, inevitably a serious crime punishable by execution.

At that time the four Advisory Board Ministers were Suoni, Suksaha, Ebilong and Oboi, all were Manchuria's outstanding founding ministers. When Emperor Shunzhi passed away, the posthumous edict was to appoint these four high-ranking ministers to assist in running the government. Among these four, Oboi was the most vicious and harsh, his henchmen among the imperial court were extremely numerous, his power in the imperial court was great, it was almost as if the power was in his hand alone. He was always afraid the party of his opponents was against him, hence he sent out countless informants inside and outside the Capital to make discreet inquiries and listen to the sound of people's acitivities. One day he received a secret report about the appearance of many posters in the city of Beijing, exposing Zhejiang's civilian surnamed Zhuang writing a book scheming rebellion, treason and heresy, Zhejiang's officials received bribe and ignored the situation, and so on.

As soon as Oboi was notified, he investigated immediately; his people passed like thunder and moved like the wind. Right this

moment Wu Zhirong's report arrived at Oboi's mansion. He summoned Wu Zhirong at once, asked him about this matter in details, and he also had his secretary, a Han, to inspect in details the original edition of the 'History of the Ming Dynasty' presented by Wu Zhirong; the result was that the report was true.

Oboi achieved his dukedom and became a high-ranking official from his meritorious service in military, he always looked down on Han officials and intellectuals. After he grasped power, he wanted to run a few big cases to suppress and intimidate the hearts of the people, not only to make the Han people not dare to have any thought of rebellion, but also to make his political opponents in the imperial court not dare to act against him. Immediately he dispatched an imperial commissioner to Zhejiang to follow up. Naturally the entire Zhuang family was arrested and brought to the Capital, but even General Songkui of Hangzhou, Inspector-general Zhu Changzuo of Zhejiang, along with the government officials under them, big and small, were all deposed and investigated. All the scholars listed on the 'History of the Ming Dynasty', not a single one escaped shackles and imprisonment.

At Lu Liuliang's house, Gu Yanwu, Huang Zongxi, two people narrated this case's sequence of events [orig. 'mountain has a connecting pulse throughout like a dragon', an idiom from fengshui] in details. Lu Liuliang listened while sighing incessantly.

That evening the three of them lay on the couch and continued their long talk about the affairs of life. When they talked about how during the late Ming period Wei Zhongxian[10] and the others eunuchs framed loyal and good subjects, how they gained control of the imperial court and committed all kinds of things against the tide, until finally the House of Ming perished, how after the Qing entered the Pass

Han people suffered massacre and unbearable and deep misfortune; none did not wring their hands and gnash their teeth in anger.

Early in the morning the next day, Lu Liuliang's entire family, along with Gu and Huang, two people, took a boat heading east. In Jiangnan, middle-class families or higher owned their own boat. Jiangnan countryside was criss-crossed with water, river ways opened in all directions, dense like spider web. Average people travelled afar by boats; it was called 'northern people ride horses, southern people ride boats', and it has always been so since ancient times.

Upon reaching Hangzhou, the canal branched to the north. One evening they stopped outside the city of Hangzhou to hear the news. The Qing court had already executed not a few government officials and common people because of this case; Zhuang Tinglong had already died, they opened his coffin and mutilated his remains; Zhuang Yuncheng could not endure the mistreatment in prison and died; several dozen of Zhuang family members, fifteen years old and up, were beheaded, their wives and children were sent away to Shenyang [Liaoning, northeast China] to serve a penal sentence, becoming Manchurian soldiers' slaves.

The former assistant minister of the Ministry of Rites Li Lingxi who wrote the preface of the book was executed by death of a thousand cuts, his four sons were beheaded. Li Lingxi's youngest son had just turned sixteen, when the prosecutor saw that the number of people to be killed was a lot, his heart softened; he ordered him to reduce his age by a year, because according to Qing law, fifteen years and under were exempt from execution or banishment. The youngster said, "My *Die-die* and *Gege* are all dead, I don't want to live alone." In the end he refused to change his confession and was beheaded as well.

Songkui and Zhu Changzuo were sent to prison awaiting trial.

The secretary Cheng Weifan was executed by lingering death. The two literary officers of Gui An and Wu Cheng were beheaded. The number of people implicated in this case, including those who were accused wrongly and died, really cannot be counted. Huzhou's prefectural magistrate Tan Ximin had just taken office for half a month, the imperial court said that he knew the facts but did not report it, he accepted bribe to cover it up; along with the prefectural judge Li Huan, and director of discipline Wang Zhaozhen, he was executed by hanging.

Wu Zhirong harbored a deep hatred toward Nanxun rich man Zhu Youming. That day he came to seek gratuitous financial help, he was severely reprimanded and chased out of the door. Now he reported to the prosecutor of this case that the book clearly indicated that 'the content was based on Zhu clan's manuscript, which was expanded and deleted'. He said that this 'Zhu clan' was indeed Zhu Youming; he also said that the name 'Zhu Youming' [Zhu was the family name of Ming emperors, 'you' means assist/protect, 'ming' bright, the same character as in 'Ming Dynasty'] clearly showed that his heart was still in the former Ming dynasty, that he was cursing the current dynasty. And thus Zhu Youming and his five sons were beheaded together, Zhu family's estate, worth more than a hundred thousand *taels*, was rewarded to Wu Zhirong by the Qing court.

The most tragic thing was: all the engravers who carved the printing blocks, the printers, the book binders, as well as the book distributors, the owners of the bookstores, the shop assistants who received the books, the readers who purchased the books, were all investigated and beheaded.

According to historical records, at that time there was a tax officer working on a tollbooth (a custom officer) at the bank of a river in Suzhou, by the name of Li Shangbai. He loved to read, and heard that the Chang Men [gate of heaven] Bookstore in

Suzhou had the newly published ‘History of the Ming Dynasty’, which the reviewers said was very good, hence he sent one of his workers to go and buy. When the worker arrived, the bookstore owner was out, hence the worker went next door, to a house of an elderly man surnamed Zhu to sit and wait. When the bookstore owner returned, he purchased the book and went back home. Li Shangbai read several chapters and did not think more of it. Several months later, this case broke out, the investigation included people everywhere who bought the books. By this time Li Shangbai was in Beijing on official work, he was charged with purchasing treasonable book and was immediately executed in Beijing. The bookstore owner and his purchasing assistant were also beheaded. Even the next door old man surnamed Zhu was implicated, they said that he knew someone was buying a seditious book, yet why he did not report it but let him sit around his house instead? He should have been beheaded, but since he was over seventy years old, he was excused from execution, but he, along with his wife and children, were banished to an army post in a remote place.

As for the famous scholars of Jiangnan, because Zhuang Tinglong admired their names and listed them as the editors of the book, they were put to death by a thousand cuts on the same day, including Mao Yuanxi and the others, fourteen men. The so-called ‘executed by death of a thousand cuts’ means blade by blade, the person’s entire body, his limbs and flesh, was slowly cut off, until the convict suffered enough pain, and then he was put to death. The number of people whose family went bankrupt and died because of this book was really difficult to count.

When Lu Liuliang and the others received the news, their hatred was unbearable; they gnashed their teeth in anger and cursed incessantly. Huang Zongxi said, “Mr. Yihuang was listed as the editor, I am afraid it will be difficult for him to escape this time.” The three of them and Zha Yihuang had always been

good friends, they were extremely concerned.

One day the boat reached Jiaxing. Gu Yanwu bought an imperial bulletin in the city, which contained a detailed list of the names and surnames of people who were guilty in the case of 'History of the Ming Dynasty'. They saw a sentence in the imperial edict that said, 'Although Zha Jizuo, Fan Xiang, Lu Qi, three people are listed as the editors, but they have never seen the book, hence they are exempt from punishment and will not be investigated anymore.' Gu Yanwu brought the bulletin back to the boat to be reviewed together with Huang Zongxi and Lu Liuliang; they clicked their tongue in amazement.

Huang Zongxi said, "This must be *Da Li Jiangjun*'s [lit. general with great power] doing."

"Who is *Da Li Jiangjun*?" Lu Liuliang asked, "Please advise."

Huang Zongxi said, "Two years ago, *Xiongdi* went to visit Mr. Yihuang's home. I saw that his mansion house looked completely new, the flower garden was spacious, the furnishing was luxurious and beautiful; it was completely different from before. The mansion even had a group of Kunqu[11] theatrical troupe performing folk musical theater, which is hard to see in Jiangnan. *Xiongdi* and Mr. Yihuang have always been good friends, we can be considered sharing liver and gallbladder, thereupon I asked him what happened. Mr. Yihuang told me a story, a really happy encounter in the windblown dust [i.e. vicissitudes of life]." Hence he narrated the story.

One day, Zha Jizuo, alias Yihuang (In the book 'Goblet Remains' there is an article 'Unexpected Meeting in the Snow', which talks about this marvelous story. The opening paragraph says, "Zha Xiaolian[12] of Haining [county], Zhejiang, alias Yihuang, was a man with splendid literary talent, as well as elegant and graceful demeanor, often speaks in long drawn out manner, unbearably melancholy, an unusually distinguished

person throughout the land, not at all looking like he is coming out of the dust, or that he is obtainable.') was at home at the end of the year, drinking wine alone. Not long afterwards the snow started to fall; the more it fell, the harder it became. Zha Yihuang was bored drinking alone, so he went out the door to enjoy the snowy scenery, and saw a beggar standing underneath the eaves to shelter from the snow. The beggar was big and tall, his bone structure looked unusually powerful, he was wearing tattered clothes, yet did not seem to mind the cold wind at all, only his face seemed to bear some anger, grief and indignation.

Zha Yihuang felt strange in his heart, thereupon he said, "The snow will not stop for a while, how about coming in for a cup of wine?"

"Very good!" the beggar replied.

Thereupon Zha Yihuang invited him to come into the house and ordered the page boy to prepare cups and chopsticks. Pouring the wine, he said, "Please!"

The beggar raised the cup to toast him and downed it. "Good wine!" he praised.

Zha Yihuang poured three cups in succession, the beggar drank in a frank and straightforward manner. Zha Yihuang loved frank and straightforward people the most; he was inwardly very happy. "*Xiongtai*'s [brother, generic term] wine capacity is superb," he said, "I wonder how much can you drink?"

The beggar replied, "When drinking with a bosom friend, a thousand cups will still be too little; when the conversation gets disagreeable, to say one word more is a waste of breath."

Although these two lines were familiar polite set of phrases, but spoken by a beggar made Zha Yihuang felt strange. Immediately he ordered the page boy to fetch a large earthen

jar of Shaoxing Nu'erhong [lit. blushing young woman (or young woman's red) from Shaoxing] wine; he said with a laugh, "*Zaixia*[13] has limited wine capacity, and just now I have drunk enough, I can't accompany brother in enjoying the drink. *Laoxiong* [old brother] drink a large bowl, I accompany with small cup, what do you say?"

"That will work," the beggar said. Thereupon the page boy warmed the wine and separately poured it into the bowl and the cup. Zha Yihuang drank a cup, the beggar drank a large bowl. By the time the beggar already drank more than twenty bowls, his face still did not show any sign of tipsiness, but Zha Yihuang was already drunk.

It should be known that as it entered the mouth, Shaoxing Nu'erhong was mild, but the wine character was quite powerful. When people of Shaoxing gave birth to a son or a daughter, they brewed wine, ranging from just a few to several dozen earthen jars, and buried the wine in the ground. When the daughter grew up and get married, the wine would be taken out and served in the wedding feast. The wine had an amber color, hence it was called 'blushing young woman'. Since the wine was buried for seventeen, eighteen years, sometimes for more than twenty years, its nature was extremely mellow and rich. When the family gave birth to a son, the buried wine was called 'zhuangyuan hong',[14], with the hope that in the future the son would serve the wine during the feast celebrating he becoming a 'zhuangyuan'. Since not everybody could be a 'zhuangyuan', most would simply serve it during the son's wedding. The wine that was brewed to be sold later also took the name 'zhuangyuan hong' and 'nu'erhong'.

The page boy helped Zha Yihuang into the inner hall to sleep. The beggar went out on his own accord to stand underneath the eaves again. The next morning Zha Yihuang woke up,

hastily he went out to see the beggar; he saw the beggar was still standing with his hands behind his back, enjoying the snow. A burst of north wind blew, Zha Yihuang felt the cold penetrated his bones and marrow, yet the beggar showed no sign of nerves.

Zha Yihuang said, “Cold weather, frozen ground, *Xiongtai*’s clothes is unavoidably too thin.” Thereupon he took off the sheepskin coat he was wearing and draped it on the beggar’s shoulder. He also took ten *taels* of silver and presented it with both hands, saying, “Just a little bit to buy some wine, please *Xiongtai* do not refuse. If it pleases you, please come again to drink wine. Last night *Xiongdi* was drunk, and failed to sweep the couch to retain the guest, please do not blame me for my negligence.”

The beggar received the money and said, “Well said.” Without even say thanks, he shook his sleeve and left.

The following spring, Zha Yihuang went to Hangzhou on a leisure visit. One day he saw an enormous ancient bell in a broken-down temple, he estimated the bell weighed at least four hundred *catties* [1 catty is approximately 1 pound or 0.5kg]. While he was enjoying the decorative design, the inscription carved onto the surface of the bell, suddenly a beggar entered the Buddha hall in big strides, grabbed the bottom of the bell with his left hand, and lifted it up. The big bell unexpectedly was raised several *chi* [Chinese foot, approximately 1/3 of a meter] off the ground. The beggar took a large bowl of meat and a large bowl of wine from underneath the bell and put the bowls aside, and then he put the ancient bell back to its original place.

Seeing his divine strength, Zha Yihuang could not help gasping with astonishment. When he looked carefully, unexpectedly the beggar was the one he drank wine with the previous winter. He laughed and asked, “*Xiongtai*, do you still

remember me?”

The beggar cast him a glance, and then he also laughed and said, “Ah, it is you. Today I will be the host, we will all drink and be merry. Come, come, come, drink wine.” While saying that, he handed over the earthen bowl.

Zha Yihuang received the bowl and took a mouthful. “This wine is really not bad,” he said with a laugh.

The beggar took a large piece of meat from the tattered bowl; he said, “This is dog meat, will you eat it or not?”

Zha Yihuang felt squeamish, but he thought, “Since I already regard him as a drinking buddy, if I decline, it would mean I am looking down on him.” Thereupon he reached out to grab it, took a bit and chewed; it was actually quite sweet and delicious. So the two of them sat on the floor of the broken-down temple, passing the tattered earthen bowl back and forth, you drink one mouthful, I drink one mouthful, while reaching into the meat bowl and ate the dog meat piece by piece. Not too long afterwards the meat and wine were finished.

The beggar laughed aloud and said, “Too bad the wine is not enough to make *Xiaolian Gong* [master Xiaolian (see above)] drunk.”

Zha Yihuang said, “Last winter we met by chance at my humble residence, today we met again without any previous appointment, we are indeed brought together by fate. *Xiongtai*’s divine strength is astonishing, turns out you are a world-class extraordinary man. To be able to make friend with such a gentleman, *Xiaodi* is very delighted. If it is alright with *Xiongtai*, how about we go to a restaurant and drink some more?”

“Wonderful, wonderful!” the beggar replied.

The two of them went to a restaurant by the bank of Xihu [West Lake, Hangzhou], where they sat on a table outside on the second floor, ordering wine and drinking together. Not too

long afterwards Zha Yihuang passed out again. By the time he sobered up, the beggar had disappeared.

That was during the final years of Emperor Chongzhen of the Ming dynasty. In several years, the Qing troops entered the Pass, the Ming dynasty fell. Zha Yihuang decided not to forge ahead, he simply spent his days leisurely at his house. One day suddenly a military officer leading four soldiers arrived at the Zha mansion. Zha Yihuang was alarmed, thinking that disaster was knocking at his door. Who would have thought that the military officer was very respectful? He said, “We received order from the Wu Military Office of Guangdong province to deliver a meager present.”

“Your honorable superior and I are total strangers,” Zha Yihuang said, “I am afraid there is a mistake here.”

The military officer took out a visiting case and extracted a sheet of crimson-colored, gilded with gold, business card; on it were written, ‘Paying my respect to Mr. Zha Yihuang, alias Jizuo’, underneath it said, ‘Junior [orig. ‘wan sheng’ – later generation] Wu Liuqi kowtows to pay a hundred respect’. Zha Yihuang thought, “I have never even heard about this name Wu Liuqi, why is he sending a present to me?” Thereupon he was speechless, not knowing what to say.

The military officer said, “My humble superior said that this is a meager gift, asking Mr. Zha not to ridicule it.” While saying that he produced two vermillion-lacquered, gold-lettered round cases, put them on the table, and bowed to pay his respect before taking his leave.

Zha Yihuang opened the gift boxes, and to his amazement he found fifty *taels* gold in one box, and six bottles of foreign wine in the other, the wine bottles were embelished with pearl and emerald; it was extraordinarly luxurious. Zha Yihuang’s shock was growing even deeper; he ran outside trying to get the military officer to take the present back, but military people

moved fast, they were already far away.

Zha Yihuang was puzzled, “Ill-gotten gains flew in, there won’t be any good fortune, only disaster. Could it be that someone is trying to frame me?” Thereupon he closed the gift boxes, resealed them, and hid them in his private room. Zha family was comparably well-off, they did not have any use of the gold, but the foreign wine was of a very famous brand; since he did not dare to open it, he could not stop his heart from itching.

Nothing happened in the next several months. One day, a *gongzi* [young master, son of official] wearing magnificent clothing arrived. The young master was only seventeen or eighteen years old, full of vigor, and had an impressive appearance; he brought eight attendants with him. As soon as he saw Zha Yihuang, he kneeled down to kowtow; he said, “Zha *Shibo* [uncle, an affectionate name for a friend older than one’s father], nephew Wu Baoyu paying his respect.”

Zha Yihuang hastily helped him up and said, “Your calling me *Shibo*, I really do not dare to accept the honor. I wonder who is your honorable *Daren*?”

Wu Baoyu replied, “My humble father’s name is Liu on top and Qi on the bottom, presently residing in Guangdong province, taking office as *Tidu* [local commander] of the entire province’s land and sea. He sends little nephew with the specific purpose of respectfully invite *Shibo* to stay for several months in Guangdong.”

Zha Yihuang said, “I have previously received your esteemed father *Daren*’s generous gift, in my heart I feel uneasy. I am ashamed to say, *Xiongdi*’s natural disposition is forgetful, I do not remember when did I make your esteemed father *Daren*’s acquaintance? *Xiongdi* is a scholar, I do not usually make friends with honorable government officials. *Gongzi* please sit down for a moment.” Finished speaking he went into the inner room. When he returned, he brought those two giftboxes out,

saying, “Would *Gongzi* please bring these back? I really do not dare to receive such a generous gift.”

He thought that as the *Tidu* of Guangdong, this Wu Liuqi must have admired Zha Yihuang’s name, and thus used very expensive give to hire him to be his secretary. This man held a high position in government, he was Manchu people’s eagle and dog to bully Han people; if Zha Yihuang received his gold and silver, he would corrupt his own innocence, thereupon his expression looked quite displeased.

Wu Baoyu said, “My humble father instructed that I must invite *Shibo*. If *Shibo* forgot my humble father, there is one thing here, please *Shibo* take a look.” From his attendant’s hand he took a bundle and opened it up. It was an extremely worn-out sheepskin coat.

When Zha Yihuang saw this old coat, he remembered he gave this coat to the strange beggar in the snow. He suddenly realized that this General Wu Liuqi was actually his drinking buddy in the past. His heart was moved, “The Tatars occupy our land under the heavens, if there is someone with authority over the troops raising righteous banner, with response from every direction, perhaps we could drive the Tatars out of the Pass. This strange beggar unexpectedly still remembers my favor of a meal and a coat of the former days, he is not someone without any conscience, if I can move his righteousness, it’s not necessarily a hopeless case. Men establish meritorious service by dedicating our lives to the service of our country. At this point, the worse that can happen is that he would kill me, so what?” Thereupon he gladly set off on a journey to Guangzhou.

General Wu Liuqi welcomed him into the mansion, his manner was extremely respectful; he said, “Liuqi wandered destitute in Jiangnan, Mr. Zha did not abandon me, and treated me as a friend. You invited me to drink wine and gave me a leather coat, that is trivial matter; but in that broken-down temple you

drank wine from a tattered bowl and grabbed dog meat with me, that showed how high you regarded me. At that time Liuqi was poor and dejected, everywhere I went I met with people's cold eyes, yet Mr. Zha was treating me with such a warm heart, Liuqi was able to raise my spirits to great height. What I have accomplished today is entirely thanks to Mr. Zha."

Zha Yihuang indifferently said, "In Junior's ['wan sheng', see above] eyes, the General Wu's brilliance of today is not necessarily comparable to the amazing beggar in the snow of the past's."

Wu Liuqi was startled, but he did not ask, he simply said, "Yes, yes!"

There was a large banquet that night, all civil and military officials in the city were invited, Zha Yihuang was made to sit in the seat of honor, while Wu Liuqi himself sat in the next seat to accompany him. The civil and military officials in Guangdong province, from inspector-general down, saw how respectful the *Tidu Daren* was to this Zha Yihuang, no one was not secretly astonished. The inspector-general even thought that Zha Yihuang was an imperial envoy minister sent by the Emperor incognito to investigate something; otherwise, Wu Liuqi usually was very arrogant toward other people, why would he be this respectful toward an ordinary scholar from Jiangnan?

After the wine had made its round, the inspector-general quietly inquired of Wu Liuqi, whether this honorable guest was a favored member of the imperial court. Wu Liuqi smiled and said, "*Laoxiong* [old brother] is really smart, you can recognize color just by its appearance; your guess is ninety percent correct." These words of him were meant to ridicule the inspector-general by saying that the tenth time he guessed, it was incorrect. Who would have thought that the inspector-general really believed that Zha Yihuang was an imperial envoy? He thought that if this Zha *Daren* stayed in Wu *Tidu*'s

mansion, he would be able to curry favor with him. Wu *Tidu* and me are always not in a good terms with each other; if when the imperial envoy returned to the Capital and submitted an unfavorable report on me, won't that be terrible? Therefore, as soon as he was back into his mansion, he prepared a hefty gift, which he delivered in person to the *Tidu* mansion early in the morning the next day.

Wu Liuqi came out to receive the guest, saying that the previous night Mr. Zha was drunk and was not awake yet; *Futai*'s gift would definitely be delivered to his hand, please be assured and do not worry too much. When the inspector-general heard this, he was greatly delighted; he left after repeatedly expressed his thanks.

The news spread, all government officials knew that the inspector-general delivered generous gifts to Mr. Zha. Nobody knew this Mr. Zha's origin, yet if even the inspector-general sent him a generous gift, how could they not do the same? Within the next several days, the gifts in the *Tidu* mansion piled up like a mountain. Wu Liuqi ordered his people to duly record every single gift, but he did not want Mr. Zha to know about it. Every day, other than managing military and public affairs, he would always accompany Zha Yihuang for a drink.

One late evening, the two of them were drinking wine in the flower garden pavilion. After a few rounds of wine, Zha Yihuang said, "I have disturbed your honorable home for many days, experiencing your great kindness. Tomorrow *Wan Sheng* is going to return to the north."

"How could Mister say those words?" Wu Liuqi said, "It was not easy to get Mister to the south, if you do not stay a year or a half, I will not let Mister go back. Tomorrow I am going to accompany Mister to five-story pagoda for a visit. Guangdong has so many scenic and historical spots, you won't be able to visit them all in a few months."

Zha Yihuang was rather drunk, he boldly said, “Although mountains and rivers are good, it has sunk into the barbarians’ hands; looking at it will only add grief to my heart.”

Wu Liuqi’s countenance changed slightly; he said, “Mister is drunk, let us take a rest a bit early tonight.”

Zha Yihuang said, “When we first met, I respected you as a hero in windblown dust [i.e. hardships of travel], hence it was enough for me to make you my friend; who would have thought that actually my eyes have failed me?”

“How did you eyes fail you?” Wu Liuqi asked.

In a loud and clear voice Zha Yihuang replied, “You have great skills, yet you do not strive for the country, for the people, but helping tyrant Zhou in his oppression, by becoming the Tatars’ eagle and dog, bullying our Great Han’s common people; this moment you are still immensely pleased with yourself, without any sense of shame. Ol’ Zha inevitably is ashamed to be your friend.” While saying that he suddenly stood up.

Wu Liuqi said, “Mister please hold down your voice, if others hear this, it will bring disaster.”

Zha Yihuang said, “Today I still regard you as a friend, I have some good words and encouragement. If you don’t want to listen, there is no harm in killing me. Ol’ Zha has no strength to truss a chicken, in any case I cannot resist.”

Wu Liuqi said, “*Zaixia* is listening with respectful attention.”

Zha Yihuang said, “General holds power over the military and government of the entire Guangdong province in your hand, you have a golden opportunity for an uprising and come over from the enemy’s side. Make a public appeal, the whole world will respond; even if the great undertaking is not successful, it will bust the Tatars’ guts. Only by dealing with them in large-scale operation will it fit your natural disposition of divine bravery, your great head.”

Wu Liuqi poured a bowl of wine and downed it in one gulp. He said, “I am delighted to hear what Mister has to say!” With both hands he reached down, ‘rip’ he tore the front piece of his own gown, exposing his black-hair-covered chest; parting the chest hair, he exposed eight small characters cut into his flesh: ‘Tian Fu Di Mu, Fan Qing Fu Ming’. [Heaven is my father, Earth is my mother, Fighting the Qing, Restoring the Ming.]

Zha Yihuang was startled and delighted at the same time. “This … what is this?” he asked.

Wu Liuqi closed his lapel well before answering, “Just now listening to Mister’s magnificent speech, I honor and respect you. In spite of the danger of perishing and extermination of your entire family, Mister opens up your liver and drip gall, giving *Zaixia* directions, *Zaixia* no longer dare to cover up the truth. Previously *Zaixia* belonged to the Beggar Clan, but this moment I am the Red Banner *Xiangzhu* of the Great Obedience Hall of Tian Di Hui [Heaven and Earth Society]. I took an oath to use the hot blood in my entire body to fight the Qing and restore the Ming.”

Looking at the tattoo on Wu Liuqi’s chest, Zha Yihuang had no more doubt; he said, “Turns out General lives in Cao camp but have your heart in Han camp. Just now my words were offensive, I have greatly offended you.”

Wu Liuqi was greatly delighted, thinking that by saying ‘live in Cao camp but have the heart in Han camp’, Zha Yihuang was comparing him to Guan Yunchang; he said, “This comparison, I dare not to accept the honor.”

Zha Yihuang said, “I wonder what is the Beggar Clan, what is Tian Di Hui? Please advise.”

“Mister please drink another cup,” Wu Liuqi said, “*Zaixia* will explain it slowly.” Thereupon the two of them drank another cup.

Wu Liuqi said, “The Beggar Clan already exists for a long time, since the Song Dynasty, it is a big clan in Jianghu. The brothers in the Clan beg to make a living, even people from rich and powerful families, upon entering the Beggar Clan, they must totally disperse their family resources and live as beggars. Within the Clan, under the *Bangzhu* [Clan Leader] there are four *Zhanglao* [elder], and then front, rear, left, right and middle, five directions, *Hufa* [protector of the law]. *Zaixia* held the Left Protector position, an eight-pouch disciple in the Clan, a position that can’t be considered too low. Afterwards, because I did not get along well with an Elder surnamed Sun, we had a fight. At that time *Zaixia* was drunk, I accidentally beat him that he was seriously hurt. Disrespecting superior is a big violation of the Clan’s law, beating up and injure an elder is an even bigger violation. *Bangzhu* and the four *Zhanglao* held a meeting, they blamed *Zaixia* and expelled me from the Clan. That day when we met at your mansion, Mister invited me for a drink, *Zaixia* has just been reprimanded and expelled, in my heart I was quite depressed, yet Mister did not abandon me, and treated *Zaixia* as a friend instead. My mind was eased quite a bit.”

“So that’s how it is,” Zha Yihuang said.

Wu Liuqi continued, “Spring of the following year, we met again by chance by the bank of West Lake, Mister made a comment, praising me as a world-class extraordinary man. *Zaixia* thought hard for many days, thinking that since the Beggar Clan could not tolerate me, all the friends in Jianghu looked down on me, every day I was as drunk as mud, abandoning myself to despair, in just several years I would die of intoxication. Yet this gentleman, Mr. Zha, said that I am an extraordinary man; could it be that I, Wu Liuqi, once stumbled, am unable to rise, and would not stick out my head to see the sun? Not long afterwards, the Qing troops marched southward, my heart was outraged, I did not know right from wrong,

unexpectedly I went to surrender to the Qing army, and rendered quite a bit of military service, massacred my fellow citizens. When I think about it, I am quite ashamed."

With grim expression Zha Yihuang said, "That is wrong. *Xiongtai* does not belong to the Beggar Clan, you may come and go alone, you may establish your own faction, why make such an unwise move, offering your service to the Qing army?"

Wu Liuqi said, "*Zaixia* is simple-minded, at that time I did not have Mister to give me directions, I have done not a few wrong things; I really deserve to die."

Zha Yihuang nodded, "Since General knew your own mistakes, it's still not too late to atone for your crimes by meritorious acts," he said.

Wu Liuqi continued, "Later on the Manchurian Qing swept the north and south, I was promoted to become a *Tidu*. Two years ago, suddenly someone broke into my bedroom in the middle of the night to assassinate me. This assassin's martial art skill was not my match, I captured him. When I lighted a lantern to look, to my surprise he was the Beggar Clan's Sun *Zhanglao*, whom I injured in the past. He rained curses on me, saying that I was despicable and shameless, that I was willing to be the barbarians' eagle and dog. The more he cursed, the more vicious he was, each sentence hit the bottom of my heart. Actually I already knew it, and every now and then I thought about it, I knew perfectly well that my conduct and deeds were very wrong. When I searched my soul deep in the night, I was very ashamed; it's just that what I thought was far less clear compared to what he cursed me. I sighed, and unsealed his acupoint. 'Sun *Zhanglao*,' I said, 'Your cursing is very true. You may go now!' He was quite surprised, but then he leaped out the window and left."

"You have done the right thing!" Zha Yihuang said.

Wu Liuqi said, “At that time, there were quite a few good anti-Qing men locked up in the *Tidu yamen* prison. First thing in the morning the next day, I looked for some excuses to release them one by one; some I said mistaken identity, some I said not the main culprit, hence I was being lenient in dealing with them. A month or so later, that Sun *Zhanglao* came back in the middle of the night to see me, he got right to the point [orig. ‘open the door and see the mountain’], asking me whether I had a repentant heart and wanted to set up merit by fighting the Qing. I pulled my saber and chopped two of my left hand fingers, saying, ‘Wu Liuqi is determined to completely correct my former misdeeds, from now on I will listen and obey Sun *Zhanglao*’s order.’” Stretching out his left hand, indeed his ring finger and little finger were gone, only three fingers remained on it.

Zha Yihuang raised his thumb, “Good man!” he exclaimed.

Wu Liuqi continued his story, “Seeing my sincerity, Sun *Zhanglao* knew that even though I am hot-headed, I have never eaten my own words; thereupon he said, ‘Very good. Let me go back to report to *Bangzhu*, I’ll ask *Bangzhu* to issue his order.’ Ten days later, Sun *Zhanglao* came back to see me, saying that *Bangzhu* and the four *Zhanglao* have had a meeting, and they decided to take me back into the Clan, but I have to start as a one-pouch disciple. He also told me that the Beggar Clan has formed an alliance with Tian Di Hui, to work for a common purpose, fighting the Qing restoring the Ming. Tian Di Hui is founded by Taiwan’s Guoxing Ye [Koxinga, ‘Lord of the Imperial Surname’] Grand Marshal Zheng’s subordinate, the military strategist Chen Yonghua, Mr. Chen. In the recent years it is thriving in Fujian, Zhejiang and Guangdong regions. Sun *Zhanglao* went to see the Society’s Great Obedience Hall’s *Xiangzhu* [incense master] on my behalf, to sponsor me into Tian Di Hui. Tian Di Hui checked me up for one year, they had me handle several important matters. After seeing that I was

absolutely loyal and not double-hearted, recently Mr. Chen issued an order from Taiwan, promoting me into the Red Banner *Xiangzhu* of the Great Obedience Hall position."

Although Zha Yihuang did not understand Tian Di Hui's background, but the army of Guoxing Ye Yanping Jun Wang [king of Yanping] Zheng Chenggong of Taiwan resisted the Qing alone; their loyalty and bravery, nobody under the heavens did not know or hear. Since Tian Di Hui was established by his military strategist Chen Yonghua, naturally they were of kindred spirit. Thereupon he repeatedly nodded his head.

Wu Liuqi continued, "In the previous years, Guoxing Ye commanded a large army to besiege Jinling, too bad the few are no match for the many, they were driven back to Taiwan. But the number of officers and soldiers under his command who found it too late to retreat and thus remained in Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Fujian, three provinces, are indeed not a few. Mr. Chen contacted these old brothers in secret, and established this Tian Di Hui. The slogan of the Society is 'Tian Fu Di Mu, Fan Qing Fu Ming', which is the eight characters *Zaixia* cut onto my chest. Ordinarily the Society brothers do not tattoo their bodies, *Zaixia* voluntarily tattooed my body to imitate Yue Wumu's idea of 'loyal to the end, dedicate oneself to the service of the country' in the past."

Zha Yihuang was very happy in his heart, he downed two cups in succession and then said, "By your action, *Xiongtai* is indeed worthy of the praise 'world-class extraordinary man'."

"These five characters 'world-class extraordinary man' [hai nei qi nan zi], I am ashamed and dare not accept the honor," Wu Liuqi said, "As long as Mr. Zha is willing to recognize me as your friend, the one surnamed Wu will be eternally happy. Our Tian Di Hui *Zongduozhu*[15] Chen Yonghua, Mr. Chen, has another name, Chen Jinnan; now he is the real famous hero and

warrior. In Jianghu, no one speaks about him with disrespect; there's even a saying that said it well: 'Whoever never knew Chen Jinnan, he calls himself a hero in vain.' *Zaixia* has never seen Chen *Zongduozhu*'s face, hence I can't be considered anybody."

Imagining Chen Jinnan's lofty quality as a hero, Zha Yihuang could not help having a longing in his heart to see him. He poured two cups of wine and said, "Come, let us drink to Chen *Zongduozhu*!" The two of them downed their cups in one gulp.

Zha Yihuang said, "Ol' Zha is only a scholar, I have no benefit to the country and to the people. Only on the day General seizes the opportunity to make your move, rising vigorously to fight the Qing, the Ol' Zha will definitely offer my service in front of the righteous army, to exhaust what little I have, my tiny toil."

From that date onward, staying at Wu Liuqi house, Zha Yihuang had secret chat with him day and night, discussing the strategy on how to fight the Qing. Wu Liuqi said, "Tian Di Hui's influence progressively expands to the northern provinces, every major province now have a fragant hall."

In total, Zha Yihuang stayed at Wu Liuqi's mansion for six or seven months, and then he returned to his hometown. When he reached home, he was greatly surprised, unexpectedly there was a huge new building right next to his former residence. As it turns out, Wu Liuqi sent people to take all the gifts and gold that Guangdong officials, big and small, presented to Zha Yihuang to Zhejiang, with which they carried out a large scale construction to build a multi-story house.

Zha Yihuang knew very well that Huang Zongxi and Gu Yanwu's aspiration was definitely to awaken and restore the Ming, they rushed about all directions to assemble the world's heroes and warriors, together they drew a plan to fight the Qing. For this reason he told them this story without concealing

anything. On the boat Huang Zongxi recounted the ins and outs of the entire story to Lu Liuliang; he said, “If this matter is leaked out, the Tatars might strike first and gain the upper hand, while Mr. Yihuang and General Wu will definitely meet the calamity of extermination along with their entire families, the great undertaking of fighting the Qing will lose one pillar.”

Lu Liuliang said, “Other than you and me, three people, this matter must never be revealed even for one word, even when we see Mr. Yihuang, we must not mention the name of Guangdong’s General Wu.”

Huang Zongxi said, “Mr. Yihuang and General Wu have this kind of relationship, the high-ranking ministers of the imperial court want to be hospitable to General Wu, when General Wu appeared in person to intercede and clear the charge on Mr. Yihuang, the imperial court will definitely not want him to lose face.”

Lu Liuliang said, “What Huang *Xiong* said is very true, it’s just that I was wondering how did Lu Qi, Fan Xiang, two people, also obtain the same verdict as Mr. Yihuang, ‘never seen the book, exempt from punishment and will not be investigated anymore’? Could it be that they also have a powerful figure in the imperial court who intercede for them?”

Huang Zongxi said, “When General Wu interceded on behalf of Mr. Yihuang, if he singled him out, perhaps it would arouse suspicion, thereupon he pulled along these two people to serve as sidekicks; we will never know.”

Lu Liuliang laughed and said, “In that case, perhaps until now Lu and Fan, two people still do not know how they still get to keep their lives.”

Gu Yanwu nodded and said, “For each life of Jiangnan scholars preserved, our strength will also increase by one person.”

(Book note: In the book ‘Strange Stories from a Chinese

Studio' [Qing dynasty book of tales by Pu Songling, 1640-1715], there is a section about 'Powerful General', narrating the story about how Zha Yihuang encountered Wu Liuqi. The concluding remarks said, 'Later on Zha was cleared of this legal case, his guilt by asccociation was withdrawn, finally he was exempted of future investigation, it was all due to the General's power.' The commentary stated, 'Profound act of disregarding one's reputation was indeed chivalrous achievements of ancient real men. Moreover, it is reported that this General was generous, outspoken and straightforward, outstanding and a rarity throughout all ages. This kind of aspiration ought not to be outdated or thrown into the ditch. Accordingly, these two worthy people's encounter was not an accident at all.' In the book 'The Remainder of the Law' there is this narrative: 'Formerly there was a rich man by the name of Zhuang Tinglong in the 'reed grass' [not sure, perhaps a place's name], who purchased the history manuscript of Prime Minister Zhu. He obtained the help of three famous scholars surnamed Wu to increase and polish the written piece, and then he printed and circulated the book. The front page listed the family names of a dozen people, with the renowned *Xiaolian* [see note 9 above] also listed to add credibility. Disaster struck before personal opportunity was achieved, all because of this ordinary book was discussing extreme literary allusions. The powerful Wu presented a report to the throne to intercede for this *Xiaolian* so that he was exempted.' As for Wu Liuqi participated in Tian Di Hui, it was not mentioned in true history, as well as past official government records.)

What the three of them were talking about was top secret at that time, they were on a boat floating on the canal, in the rear cabin there were only Lu family's mother and children, three people, plus Huang Zongxi was talking in very low voice, hence they did not expect anybody else to eavesdrop, the boat did not have any wall, they were not afraid of any ear on the other side

of the wall. Unexpectedly, Gu Yanwu had just finished talking, suddenly they heard strange laughter from above their heads. The three men were shocked. “Who’s there?” they shouted together. But there was not the least bit of sound. The three of them looked at each other in dismay; they all thought, “Could it be that ghosts and demons really exist?”

Among the three, Gu Yanwu was the boldest, plus he had trained a little bit of superficial martial art for self-defense; after calming himself down, he reached into his bosom and pulled a dagger. He pushed open the cabin door and walked toward the bow. Focusing his eyes he looked at the top of the sail. Suddenly a dark shadow suddenly appeared from the sail and pounced down on him. “Who’s there?” Gu Yanwu shouted, while lifting his dagger to stab at the dark shadow. But suddenly he felt pain on his wrist, as it was grabbed by the shadow, followed by his back went numb, since his acupoint was sealed. The dagger fell from his hand, while he was pushed back into the cabin.

Seeing Gu Yanwu was pushed back into the cabin, and that behind him stood a man wearing black clothing, Huang Zongxi and Lu Liuliang were shocked. They noticed the man was big and tall, with malicious laugh across his face. Lu Liuliang said, “In the middle of the night, Sire charged in without permission, what is your intention?”

With a cold laugh the man said, “Thanks to the three of you, *Laozi* will be promoted and gain wealth. Wu Liuqi is about to rebel, Zha Yihuang is about to rebel, When Ao *Shaobao* [Junior Guardian Ao – referring to Oboi] receives the secret report, won’t he reward me handsomely? Hey, hey, the three gentlemen may come with me to Beijing as witnesses.”

Lu, Gu and Huang, three people were secretly fearful; they had deep regret in their hearts, “We whispered in the night on the boat, he still heard it. We were too reckless, death is

nothing to be resented, but this time we implicate General Wu, we may spoil the great undertaking."

Lu Liuliang said, "Sire, what are you talking about? We don't understand it the least bit. If you want to frame good people, go ahead and do it yourself, but if you are thinking of dragging other people along, that will not work." He has made up his mind to disregard everything; if the man killed him, then it would be 'the dead cannot testify'.

The big man let out a cold laugh, suddenly he lunged forward and sealed the acupoints on the pit of Lu Liuliang and Huang Zongxi's stomach. Immediately Lu and Huang, two people were unable to move a single step. The big man laughed aloud and said, "Brothers, come into the cabin. This time we, Vanguard Battalion, are rendering great meritorious service." From the stern several men responded together, and four men entered the cabin, all wearing clothes commonly wore by people who live and make a living on a boat; they all laughed heartily.

Gu, Huang and Lu, three persons looked at each other in dismay. They knew that Vanguard Battalion was the Emperor's personal guard, for some reason, unexpectedly these people had been able to catch up with them early on, dressed as boatmen, all along eavesdropping on them outside behind the sail. Huang Zongxi and Lu Liuliang could not be blamed, but for the past several years Gu Yanwu has been tracking all over Shenzhou [old name for China], everywhere he went he got to know heroes and warriors, it could even be said that his vision was not weak, yet toward this several boatmen he was unexpectedly not being careful.

One of the personal guard called out, "Boatmen, turn the boat around, we are going back to Hangzhou. If you do something strange, watch your dog life."

The boatman holding the rudder at the stern responded, "Yes!"

The helmsman was a sixty, seventy years old man, when Gu Yanwu hired the boat, he had had a talk with him, the boatman's face was full of wrinkles, his back was bent like a bow, certainly he looked like someone who row and pull the boatman's tow-rope all year round; at the time of the meeting, he did not have any suspicion. What he did not expect, however, was that although this old boatman was genuine goods at fair prices, his helpers, the other boatmen had been swapped with these personal guards under threat. With no way out, Gu Yanwu could only blame himself for having a loud arrogant talk with Huang and Lu, two people, that they fell into this perilous situation without knowing it.

The man in black laughed and said, "Mr. Gu, Mr. Huang, Mr. Lu, the three of you, gentlemen simply have too great of a reputation, that even those old men in the Capital have heard about you; otherwise, we would not have been following you. Ha ha …!" Turning his head toward his four subordinates he said, "We have obtained the conclusive evidence that Wu *Tidu* of Guangdong is plotting a rebellion. Now we must hasten to Haining [county, Zhejiang] to arrest that man surnamed Zha. These three rebel thieves are extremely obstinate, since they are not able to escape, we must guard against them taking poison or drowning themselves by jumping into the river. Each one of you must keep your eyes on each one of them, if there is any mishap, your responsibility might not be small."

"Yes," the four of them replied, "We will carefully obey Gua *Guandai*'s [not sure what it is, must be military rank] instruction."

Gua *Guandai* said, "When we are back in the Capital and see Ao *Shaobao*, we won't have to worry about promotion and gaining wealth."

A personal guard laughed and said, "All of us rely entirely on Gua *Guandai*'s cultivation for promotion. Based on the four of

us alone, how can we have this kind of good fortune?”

From the bow suddenly someone let out a ‘hey, hey’ laugh; the man said, “Based on the four of you, indeed you do not have that kind of good fortune.”

‘Whoosh!’ suddenly the cabin’s door flew open, a thirty-something man dressed as a scholar appeared on the doorway. He had his hands behind his back, his face carried a smiling expression.

Gua *Guandai* shouted, “There are officers at work here; who are you?”

The scholar smiled without answering; he took a step into the cabin. Saber’s light flashed, two single-blade sabers chopped down on him from left and right. The scholar sidestepped the attack, his palm hacked down onto the top of Gua *Guandai*’s head. Gua *Guandai* hastily raised his left arm to block, while his right hand clenched into a fist and he punched it forward with all his might.

The scholar’s left foot kicked backward, the kick hit a personal guard on the pit of his stomach; the personal guard screamed while spurting a mouthful of blood. The other three personal guards raised their sabers, sweeping across and chopping down. The space inside the cabin was too narrow, the scholar fully used his *qin na* [grab and capture, grappling] skill, as he hacked, struck, hooked and hit. ‘Crack!’ a hack with the edge of his palm hit a personal guard on the neck, breaking his neckbone.

Gua *Guandai* struck with his right palm toward the back of the scholar’s head. The scholar parried with a backhand left palm. ‘Bang!’ two palms collided, Gua *Guandai* was thrown backward, his back heavily crashed onto the cabin’s wall, a section of the wall immediately collapsed. The scholar sent out two palm strikes in succession, striking the remaining two personal

guards on the pit of their stomach. ‘Crack, crack!’ two persons’ ribs immediately broke. Gua *Guandai* leaped out through the hole on the cabin’s wall. The scholar shouted, “Where do you think you are going?” He sent out a left palm strike. It seemed that the palm would strike Gua *Guandai*’s back, unexpectedly right this moment Gua *Guandai*’s left foot kicked back, the palm happened to strike the sole of his foot, the palm force sent him flying out instead.

Gua *Guandai* urgently leaped and ran away. He saw a weeping willow on the bank of the river, with its branches drooping down into the river. Immediately he grabbed the willow branch and somersaulted over the willow tree. The scholar rushed to the bow of the boat, he picked up the bamboo pole for punting boats, and hurled it out. Under the moonlight the bamboo pole appeared like a flying snake, as it was shooting forward. “Ahhh!” they heard Gua *Guandai* let out a long scream. The bamboo pole pierced his back, and nailed him to the ground. The pole did not stopped swaying.

The scholar entered the cabin. He unsealed Gu, Huang and Lu, three people’s acupoints, and then pushed the bodies of four personal guards into the canal before finally lighting the lantern again. Gu, Huang and Lu, three people did not stop expressing their gratitude, and asked his name and surname.

The scholar laughed and said, “My lowly name has just been mentioned my Mr. Huang. *Zaixia* surnamed Chen, my coarse name Jinnan.”

[The following part is beyond me, my apology for bad translation.] Book Note:

Our book was written from October 23rd, 1969 to September 22nd, 1972. When it was planned out at the beginning, involuntarily I thought about literary inquisition. In my home I have a well-known historical literary inquisition. One of my

ancestors was Zha Siting. He was made the imperial examiner of Jiangxi province by the assistant minister of the Ministry of Rites in the fourth year of Yongzheng of Qing. One of the exam questions he came out with was ‘Holding the people together’ [维民所止 wei min suo zhi]. This sentence came from the ‘Book of Songs’, ‘Eulogy of Shang Dynasty’, ‘Mysterious Bird’: “A thousand *li* of the country’s territory, holding the people together.” The idea was that the country’s vast territory is the place where common people reside, it is to cherish the people.

It was actually a very common subject, but someone lodged an accusation to Emperor Yongzheng, saying that the two characters ‘wei zhi’ [维止] were actually ‘yong zheng’ [雍正] with the head removed [i.e. the radical stroke removed]. By producing this exam question, the idea was to remove the Emperor’s head. At that time Yongzheng had just ascended the throne, he became the Emperor after intense struggle and he himself had chopped not a few people’s heads. Inevitably he had a guilty conscience, and had gone as far as depending on ‘fortune telling by unpicking Chinese characters’ in his conducts.

He had Zha Siting’s entire family arrested and dealt with severely. Zha Siting was tortured badly, and finally died in prison. Yongzheng still issued an order to have his body mutilated. His son also died in prison. His family exiled. The scholars in the entire Zhejiang province were banned from taking palace examinations for six years. Later on Zha Shenxing was released from prison and allowed to return to his hometown, but he passed away not long afterwards.

Another argument was that Zha Siting had written a book called ‘Wei Zhi Lu’ [Diary of holding together]. There was a eunuch telling Yongzheng that ‘wei zhi’ was removing the head of ‘yong zheng’. He also said that in the ‘Wei Zhi Lu’ there was a paragraph, “Kangxi’s sixty-first year, on such and such month and such and such date, there was a major thunderstorm; I

was on furlough at home, suddenly I heard great traveling, the Emperor's fourth son succeeding the throne, it's very strange." 'Great traveling' was the Emperor passing away, 'the Emperor's fourth son' was precisely Yongzheng. The book said 'very strange', obviously it was ridiculing Yongzheng seizing the throne by dishonest method.

'Wei Zhi Lu' also documented in the vicinity of Zhu Qiao [Zhu bridge] town near Hangzhou, there was a Guan Di [Emperor Guan's] Temple; it was said about the Temple: "An ancient temple in an abandoned village just like the remains of man [汉 – han, also means 'Han ethnic group']; only the field, shop and pontoon bridge have various [诸 - Zhu] surnames." The character 'Zhu' [诸 - various] and 'Zhu' [朱 – vermillion, also the surname of Ming Emperors] are homophone, Yongzheng thought that Han people cherished the memory of the former Ming.

As for Zha Siting's exam question in Jiangxi, actually the poem in the exam subject was from the 'Analects of Confucius': "Person of noble character do not use words to raise other people, do not reject words because of the speaker." The third topic was from Mencius: "Mountain path among the footpath, anything useful can become a road, anything useless in between are no more than reeds and grass. Today the reeds and grass are the heart." At this time ensuring any action would take five days. The palace courtyard said that he was intentionally slandering the imperial decree; the third subject 'reeds and grass as the heart' was akin to saying that 'not knowing what it pointed to, the palace courtyard was bent on not asking anything'.

Yongzheng's imperial decree said, "Zha Siting … *Zhen* [I, an emperor referring to self] ordered to walk in the inner palace courtyard, afterwards to instruct the scholars in the government cabinet. Seeing his words tricky and hypocritical,

while at the same time hold the notion of looking out for the wolf [i.e. watch one's back], presumably his intentions are dishonorable. Upon reviewing Jiangxi's examination subject today, it is obvious that he harbors the thought of resentment, and intents on mocking the present situation. In anticipation of the aforementioned, his daily perverse ideas were be recorded, and officers were dispatched to search his dwelling and belongings, two books of diary were found, rebellious and confusing beyond belief, with fabricated words of complaint and slander in abundance. Also toward the administrative personnel and servants of the divine ancestor, he ridicule and slander wantonly … the flooding disaster of Rehe [Qing imperial resort at Chengde], this book says more than eight hundred government officials were drown, it also says flying locusts in the rain covered the sky; this is a preposterous statement, there is no such thing … He is to be arrested and interrogated immediately, handed over to the Three Judicial Chief Ministries for them to strictly examine and draft the final plan."

Yongzheng's criminal charge, which he announced publicly was: looking at his appearance as well as deducing his dishonorable designs, mocking the present situation, recording natural disaster in his journal.

When our book was first published in 'Ming Pao' [newspaper, Hong Kong], the first chapter was called 'Prologue', the chapter title was Zha Shenxing's poem, 'In this way is the ice and frost, in this way is the road' ['ice and frost' is allusion to moral integrity]. Zha Shenxing's original name was Silian, he was Zha Siting's older brother. He, as well as his second brother Sili and third brother Siting, were all Hanlin [i.e. graduate of Hanlin Imperial Academy]. Their paternal older male cousin Sihan was a Bangyan[16], their paternal nephew Zha Sheng was a Shi Jiang [侍讲 I don't know what this is.], also Hanlin. Zha Shenxing's oldest son Kejian, younger paternal male cousin

Sixun, were all Jinshi [successful candidate in the highest imperial civil service examination/palace graduate]. At that time they were called 'One family seven Jinshi, paternal uncle paternal nephew five Hanlin', the extended family was very prosperous.

Because Zha Shenxing and Sili were implicated in their younger brother's literary inquisition, they were brought from their hometown to the prison in the Capital on imperial orders during a severe winter. At that time the number of famous scholars implicated by this case was really not a few. En route to the prison Zha Shenxing penned a poem which he gave as a present to a friend in disaster, another Jinshi in his extended family, part of it says, "In this way is the ice and frost, in this way is the road, seven full periods apart from two of the same year."

Zha Shenxing could be considered first-class poet of the Qing Dynasty, among the people of Tang and Song dynasties, probably he could be considered second-class. Qing people Wang Shizhen, Zhao Yi, Ji Xiaolan, and the others considered his poem to be on par with Lu You [1125-1210, widely regarded as the greatest of Southern Song poets], both had their own strength and weakness; perhaps this praise was a bit too much.

Emperor Kangxi loved his poems. He took the provincial level imperial examination three times but failed to reach Jinshi. Kangxi summoned him into the Palace, and drilled him at the Southern Study Room. After entering the Palace he took the exam again, and finally he scored second place and became the second Jinshi. At that time his older paternal male cousin, his second brother, paternal nephew, and son had already become Jinshi. Taking the exam together with Zha Shenxing and became Jinshi in *guwei* year [twentieth year of 60-year cycle, *i.e.* 1703] (or Kangxi's forty-second year) was his younger paternal male cousin Sixun, as well as his fellow hometown

scholar Chen Shiguan (the father of Chen Jialuo from 'The Book and The Sword'). Both Zha Shenxing and his second brother Sili were disciples of Huang Zongxi.

Zha Shenxing also wrote 'Poetry Anthology Dedicated to Paternal Cousin', fifty chapters, with six-chapter sequel. When in Beijing prison, he did not stop writing poems. Today his journal of prison poem numbered several, the poetic style looked similar:

'Weeping over Third (younger) Brother Runmu [lit. moist/damp wood]': "Family gathered together in difficulty, more to come to deliver thine ends, swallowing my cries from my brothers, sobbing blood into my child. The earth exudes its cold *yin* [shady/negative (of *yin* and *yang*)] hole, the sky cries out its wretched placid wind. No sigh reaches to distant netherworld, father and son capture accidental encounter." (Original note: the aforementioned nephew died one day earlier.) Note: Runmu was Zha Siting, his son died one day earlier.

'Leap day at the beginning of the third month': "The year ended and elderly man wearing mourning garments, it is something that one constantly has to deal with. Concern over less spring rain for the grass, in place of more dawn breeze cherished by thousand flowers." Note: 'less spring rain' was an allusion to less kindness of the imperial court, 'more dawn breeze' was pointing at the harsh government affairs.

Five-character-quatrain[17]: "A place in the south to the supervisor in the north, the one being passed on was the embroidered prison garment. What's left surrounded the people on the outside, chasing after the memory of summer after summer of ruthless disaster." (Note: 'disaster' clearly pointed to Wei Zhongxian [see note 7 above] and the other eunuchs framing the innocents.) "The bugs get their name from the

stench, rampant crimes are difficult to conceal, all doing harm to the flesh and blood, contemptible people [orig. ‘louse’] at the end of degradation.” “Human world has peach and apricot, gazing in despair toward preserved spring sunset. The rolling wind brought flowers flying over, under which family’s tree will it land?” (Original note: There was a storm one day before Qingming[18], apricot flower spread underneath the tree, blown into the wall.)

‘Defeated flock of magpies’: “’Cha, cha’ in the morning, ‘luo, luo’ in the evening, magpies happily sang, over the ugly cry of crows. Children shoot crows, they do not shoot magpies; the reason was tasseled shield produced cheerful south. (Note: tasseled shield, mountain name, snow-covered and extremely cold). Two magpies, heartless birds of prey, occupying a nest on a tall tree with no neighbor next to it, just like a hawk changed into a turtle-dove, but its eyes had not changed, having a voracious desire to look around and scheming to swallow the neighbor up with a sudden cross-over. Every time it feeds the flock withdraw, how can six states dare to struggle against the powerful Qin? I desire to press on, to light a fire to burn the nest, while at the same time moving back and forth with a sigh. Which creature wishes to lose its flock? Alas! Which creature wishes to lose its flock?”

‘At the end of spring, a lone willow has not stretched its branch, hard-pressed walk underneath enjoys accidental success’: “New leaves and trees outside the encirclement, out of the wall came high pavilion, the drawing on the ground thus became a prison, coming alone the companions are captured behind bars. I became feeble no matter which road I take, day and night looking towards thine glory. Already after the third month, in the end, all eyes have not turned green. Desiring for the unlearned old man, why did thou appear to be disorganized? Furthermore, living between the heaven and the

earth, grass and trees are not heartless. After sending forceful words, accordingly ask the prisoner office in haste.”

In his poems, Zha Shenxing sympathized with common people’s pain and difficulties a lot, so much so that he also had compassion toward birds and animals, grass and trees. When the ‘Poetry Anthology Dedicated to Paternal Cousin’ was published, the poems written in prison were also retained.

All the titles of our book’s fifty chapters are taken from the couplets of Zha Shenxing’s poems. Although the ‘Poetry Anthology Dedicated to Paternal Cousin’ has rich variety of writings, to pick fifty seven-character lines that are related to each chapter’s content is not easy. [Translator’s note: the original titles of each chapter consist of two lines, seven characters each.] The method that was used here is not picking similar lines from different poem of different journal, or even gathering lines from poetry anthologies of different authors; rather, it was selecting and using completely related lines of one person’s poem. Sometimes the upper line was correct, the bottom part was unrelated, or the bottom line was very suitable, but the upper part could not be used; hence the entire lines had to be abandoned. For this reason, inevitably some chapter titles are not too close-fitting.

The reason why I want to collect of Zha Shenxing’s poems was because Kangxi had seen most of it (except the ‘prison poems’); Kangxi had even written the ‘Dedicated to Paternal Cousin’ [jing ye tang[19]] three characters on a horizontal inscribed board for Zha Shenxing. Of course, I also have a personal desire to proclaim my own ancestor’s poems. Modern scholars are aware that Zha Shenxing was a major poet of the Qing dynasty, but as for how he wrote the poems, I am afraid very few people have ever read about it; after all, he must not be compared to genuine great poets.

When people from ancient times wrote literary work mentioning their own ancestors, they would never dare to address the ancestor by name; usually they would add a character ‘Gong’ [公 – duke/father-in-law/honorable gentleman] after their nickname (honorary title) of official rank. I remember growing up listening to my elders talking about our ancestors in the memorial hall, when it comes to Zha Shenxing, they said ‘Chu Bai Tai Gong’ [lit. the first white great-grandfather’; when it comes to Zha Sheng, they said ‘Sheng Shan Tai Gong’ [lit. sonorous mountain great-grandfather’. When modern writers write in vernacular, we do not need to be such literal-minded, if we want to revere our ancestors, revering them in our hearts is enough.

In the title of this chapter, the ‘crooked bunch’ refers to ‘people who implicate and frame others’, the meaning of ‘crooked bunch wend on a rampage courting disaster’ is the persecution of many well-known scholars charged with guilt by association by such people. The ‘high wind’ is ‘high and steep, and clear-cut’, describing lofty personality with elegant manner, smart and bright; the idea behind ‘discussing early morning moon during high wind’ is: only virtuous hero, scholar with strength of character, can obtain the acclaim as ‘man with excellent knowledge and experience’.

Chapter 2

In most peculiar circumstance best friendship at first meeting.

(Translated by Foxs)

Wei Xiaobao was scared out of his wits, he held on tightly to the horse's tail. He heard the wind rushing on his ears and felt his body was slipping down, he did not stop shouting and cursing, "My good mama, hot piece

mama! Mao Shiba, if you don't stop the horse, laozi ..."

Since the ancient time Yangzhou has always been known as a flourishing city with famous scenic spots. Tang dynasty's poet Du Mu wrote, "I awake, after dreaming ten years in Yangzhou, Known as fickle, even in the Street of Blue Houses[20]." People of old said that among the pleasures of life, nothing can surpass ‘having a string of a thousand taels wrapped around one's waist and ride a crane to Yangzhou[21]. Yangzhou was located within the canal built by Emperor Yang of Sui [569-618 AD, reigned 604-618 AD], consequently, the water traffic between Jiangsu and Zhejiang must pass through Yangzhou. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, it had become the gathering place of major salt merchants, and thus it prospered to be one of the wealthiest place in China.

During Kangxi of Qing Dynasty's early years, Ming Yu Fang ['Fang' means a district, a subdivision of a city, 'Ming' - cry (of a bird), 'Yu' – jade] by the Shouxi [lit. 'slender/thin west'] Lake of Yangzhou, where the Street of Blue Houses was located, was known for its high concentration of famous courtesans.

It was a nice evening in the spring, the lanterns were just lit, from each courtyard in Ming Yu district came the sound of bamboo flutes and happy laughter, mixed with shouts of people playing drinking game and ordering more drink, plus songs and drunken brawl. Music and wine were everywhere; it was indeed a picture of gaiety in a peaceful time.

Suddenly, from both the south and the north side of the area came the sound of about five or six men shouting together, "Friends of courtyard businesses, ladies, and guests who are here to have fun, everybody, listen up: We are looking for a man, we are not interested in everybody else, please do not

shout or move needlessly. If you do not obey our instruction, please do not blame us for being rude!"

After a short burst of commotion, Ming Yu district immediately turned very quiet, but not for long, because noise was rising from all directions in the courtyards; the women were screaming and the men were shouting in great confusion.

A large banquet was being held at the Li Chun Yuan [lit. 'beautiful/lovely spring courtyard'], about a dozen or so prominent salt merchants were sitting around three tables, each one of them had a courtesan sitting next to him. As soon as they heard the commotion, their countenance was greatly changed. "What is it?" "Who is it?" "Are they policemen investigating a case?" they all wondered.

Suddenly there was the beating-drum-like sound outside the main gate, or perhaps the main gate itself was being beaten. The servants [orig. ‘turtle slave’] were so frightened that they did not know whether they should open the door. 'Bang!' the main gate was broken, about seventeen, eighteen big men burst in. These men were wearing short clothes, with plain white band tied around their heads and dark green belt around their waists. In their hands they held either a flickering saber, an iron club, or an iron stick. As soon as the salt merchants saw them, they recognized these men as salt smugglers.

At that time the salt duty was quite heavy. To avoid paying tax, these smugglers sold the salt in the black market and made quite a fortune. Yangzhou was the salt distribution center of the Huai River north of the Yangtze River. Generally outlaws would form gangs of smugglers. These salt traffickers were very fierce and tough, and would disperse instantly whenever they met a squad of government officers and soldiers, but if they came across a smaller number of soldiers, without saying anything they would simply take out their weapons and attack. Therefore, the local authorities would frequently close their

eyes and did not intervene.

The salt merchants were aware that these salt smugglers' trade was usually limited to illegal salt; they neither rob travelling merchants nor commit other crimes, they only dealt with common people and usually were quite fair, seldom use force. Today, seeing those smugglers breaking into Ming Yu district carrying malicious air, the merchants panicked, but they were also surprised.

A man, about fifty years of age, among the smugglers said, "Friends, we apologize for this disturbance." While saying that, he raised his cupped fist from left to right, then again from right to left; and then he said loud and clear, "I wonder if a friend of Tian Di Hui[22] by the surname of Jia, Jia *Laoliu* [lit. 'Ol' Six'], Jia *Laoxiong* [Old Fellow Jia], is here?" His gaze swept the faces of the salt merchants one by one.

Meeting his sharp gaze, the merchants were terrified; they repeatedly shook their heads, but inwardly they were quite relieved, thinking, "It's only the clan and society in Jianghu carrying vendetta against each other in a bustling street, it may have nothing to do with outsiders."

Raising his voice, the elderly smuggler called out, "Jia *Laoliu*, this afternoon at a tavern by Lake Shouxi you were talking rubbish; you said Yangzhou's salt smugglers are cowards who do not dare to rebel by killing government officials, who can only smuggle salt, small-scale business which does not require any guts. You were drunk [orig. 'full of yellow soup'], shouting and mumbling big; you said that if Yangzhou's salt smugglers refuse to accept, we should go to Ming Yu district to look for you. Well, here we are! Jia *Laoliu*, you are a warrior of the Tian Di Hui, how come you are now shrinking back your head like a turtle?"

The rest of them, a dozen or so salt smugglers, echoed, "Tian

Di Hui warrior, how come you are shrinking back your head like a turtle? Hot piece mama, are you the Heaven and Earth Society, or Turtle Head Society?"

The elderly man said, "It was Jia *Laoliu* alone who spoke rubbish, we must not drag the other good friends of Tian Di Hui into this. We are salt smugglers, we earn our food with sweat and blood, how can we be compared to the heroes of Tian Di Hui? But we are not turtles who pull back our heads either!"

After waiting for quite a while, that Jia *Laoliu* of Tian Di Hui had never answered. The old man shouted, "Go and search every room, if you see that turtle head surnamed Jia, invite him to go out. This man has a big blade scar on his face, he is very easy to recognize." The salt smugglers complied loudly and immediately went from room to room.

Suddenly from a room on the eastern wing came a rough yet heroic voice, "Who's shouting and rambling in here, disturbing *laozi* seeking merriment?"

The salt smugglers called out one after another, "Jia *Laoliu* is here!" "Jia *Laoliu*, come out!" "Damn it, this dog thief has guts!"

The man on the east wing laughed aloud and said, "*Laozi* is not surnamed Jia, it's just that you guys recklessly scolding Tian Di Hui, it's not pleasing in *laozi*'s ears. *Laozi* is not of Tian Di Hui, but I know each and every one of Tian Di Hui friends are heroes and warriors. You, salt smugglers, are not even fit to carry their shoes or wipe their butt."

The salt smugglers shouting and yelling indistinctly; three men wielding sabers charged into the room, but a series of 'Aiyo!' was heard, the three men flew out of the room one by one and dropped to the floor. One man's saber knocked his own forehead, blood flowed and he passed out instantly. Six salt smugglers charged together into the room, but with repeated cry every single one of them was thrown back out. These

people continued swearing and cursing, but no one dared to enter.

The old man took several steps forward toward the room, under the dim light he saw a big burly man with dragon-like [orig. '虬' - qiu, young dragon with horns] whisker was sitting on the bed, his head was wrapped in plain white cloth. There was no blade scar on his face, apparently he was not Jia *Laoliu*. In loud voice the old man asked, "Sire has quite a talent, may I ask your honorable surname and your great given name?"

The man inside the room cursed, "Whatever your *Die-die*'s [see Chapter 1] surname and given name are, naturally that's what *laozi*'s surname and given name are. Good kid, you have forgotten your own [paternal] grandpa's name and surname?"

From among the crowd of courtesans standing on the side, a woman, approximately thirty years old, suddenly giggled. A salt smuggler rushed a step forward and 'slap! slap!' he struck the courtesan that tears flowing for her eyes and nose. "Damn it!" the salt smuggler cursed, "Stinky prostitute, what's so funny?" The courtesan was so scared that she did not dare to make any noise.

Suddenly from the main hall a boy, about twelve, thirteen years old, scrambled in and swore loudly, "You dare to hit my Ma! You are a dead turtle, rotten bastard. I wish a thunder will strike you when you go out, I wish the back your hands will be infected by rotten boils, which will eat your hands and your tongue. I wish bloody pus will go into your belly, rotting your stomach and intestine!"

The salt smuggler was livid, reaching out, he was trying to grab the boy, but the boy dodged and hid behind another salt smuggler. With his left hand the first salt smuggler pushed the second salt smuggler, toppling him down in the process, then with his right fist he punched the boy's back as hard as he

could.

"*Daye*[23], please spare his life!" the middle-aged courtesan called out in great alarm.

The boy was very slippery, he ducked and slipped under the salt smuggler's crotch, while reaching up to grab; he happened to grab his scrotum, which he squeezed with all his might. The salt smuggler was so much in pain that he let out a strange 'wah! wah!' cry. The boy quickly slipped away. To vent his anger, the salt smuggler punched the middle-aged courtesan. 'Bang!' the courtesan passed out instantly.

The boy threw himself on her body while calling out, "Ma, Ma!" The salt smuggler grabbed the back of the boy's collar and lifted him up. He was about to punch the boy when the older salt smuggler shouted sternly, "Don't create trouble! Put that little boy down!" The salt smuggler put the boy down and kicked his buttocks, sending him rolling down on the floor and 'bang!' he hit the wall.

The older man cast a glance to the salt smuggler, then he said toward the door, "We are the brethrens from the Green Gang; just because a friend from Tian Di Hui by the surname of Jia insulted the Green Gang in public and said he would wait for us to settle the account here in Ming Yu district, we have come to look for him. Since Sire is not a friend from Tian Di Hui, we are like the well water does not mix with the river water; why did you injure us? Please leave your name, so that when our *Bangzhu* [Clan or Gang Leader] ask, we can explain to him."

The man inside the room laughed and said, "You are looking for a Tian Di Hui friend to settle an account, what does it have to do with me? I am here looking for pleasure. Since we are like the well water does not mix with the river water, then don't come here bothering *laozi*. I do have an advice for *laoxiong*, though: Tian Di Hui people, it would be better if *laoxiong* do not

provoke them. If they curse you, just let it go, you'd better tuck your tail between your legs and continue smuggling salt quietly, making some money."

The older man angrily said, "I have never seen anybody in Jianghu more unreasonable than you."

The man inside the room coldly said, "Reasonable or not, what do I have to do with you? Could it be that you are looking for someone to marry into your family, and you want to call me your *Jiefu* [older sister's husband]?"

Right this moment, three men quietly sneaked in from outside, they were also dressed as salt smugglers. One of them was a skinny man wielding spear chain, in a low voice he asked, "What is this all about?"

The older man shook his head and said, "He doesn't want to talk, just keep on saying that we must swallow Tian Di Hui's insult. Perhaps that man surnamed Jia is hiding inside."

The skinny man swung his spear chain and tossed his head. The older man pulled out a pair of about a foot long daggers from his waist. Suddenly the four of them charged together into the room, followed by the sound of weapons colliding.

Lovely Spring Courtyard was one of four biggest courtyards in Ming Yu district, each room was exquisitely furnished with pear wood tables and chairs, with mahogany beds and couches. An uninterrupted series of 'Bing! Bang! Crack!' was heard; obviously all the furniture inside the room was shattered. The madame proprietor's chubby face was trembling, her mouth mumbled prayers to Buddha, her heart was in constant pain.

The four salt smugglers did not stop shouting and yelling, but the man in the room did not make any noise. The people in the hall stood far away for fear that they might suffer disaster by accident. The noise of colliding weapons inside the room was getting faster and faster. Suddenly someone let out a miserable

scream; presumably one of the salt smugglers was hit.

The burly man who kicked the boy, whose scrotum was still hurting really bad, saw that the boy was crawling up from the bottom of the wall. His anger flared again, and he swung his fist to punch the boy. The boy sidestepped, but the burly man flipped his hand and slapped him on the face, sending the boy spinning twice. The crowd of servants and salt merchants saw how vicious the salt smuggler was, if the beating continued, the boy would be killed, but nobody dared to intervene. The burly man raised his right fist to strike the crown of that boy's head. The boy darted forward to escape, he pushed the side-room door open and dashed in.

"Ah!" everybody in the hall gasped. The burly man was also startled, but he did not dare to pursue into the room.

As the boy dashed inside, for a moment he was unable to see clearly. Suddenly the weapons clashed again, 'Ding! Dang!' Under the sparks he saw a man was sitting on the bed, his head was wrapped in white cloth bandage; his appearance looked terrifying. "Ah!" the boy screamed in terror.

When the sparks vanished, the room turned dark again. But the candles in the hall shone their light through the door, gradually his eyes adjusted to the dark and he was able to see clearly. The man with bandaged head was wielding a single-edged saber, which he brandished furiously. From the four salt smuggler leaders, only two remained, the other two were lying on the floor. The two that remained were the older man wielding a pair of daggers, and a tall and sturdy man. The boy thought, “This man’s head is heavily injured, and he is unable to fight standing up, he won’t be these salt smugglers’ match; I’d better flee immediately. But I wonder how Mama is?”

Remembering how his mother was beaten and humiliated, anger surged up in his breast; he swore through the door, “Turtle thief, your granny, f*ck your eighteen generations

ancestor’s stinky salt skin … your salt smuggling home is full of salt. Your granny, your mother, your wife are all dead, and you pickle them with salt and you sell them as pork jerky on the street, three catties for a *wen* [coin of smallest denomination], as if people would want to buy your stinky salt-cured meat …” Hearing his malicious and sarcastic swearing, the salt smugglers in the hall were furious; they wanted to rush inside and beat him to death, but nobody dared to enter the room.

The man in the room suddenly swept his saber diagonally down, ‘shua!’ he chopped the tall and sturdy man’s shoulder that even his shoulder bone was severed. The big man staggered back while screaming in loud voice, his body swayed and he almost fell down. The older man raised his pair of daggers and stabbed straight toward the pit of the man’s stomach. The man lifted up his saber to parry. Right this moment there was a dull slap as the big man’s whip struck his right shoulder. With a ‘clang!’ the saber fell down. The older man howled and struck with his pair of daggers. The man turned his left palm over and ‘Crack! Crack!’ several of the older man’s ribs were broken as he was thrown outside the room, spurted fresh blood, and fainted on the floor.

Although the big man’s left shoulder was heavily injured, he was still very bold. Grabbing a mace, he swung it down on the top of the man’s head. The man was unable to dodge, as if his entire strength was already depleted and he was unable to move even a single muscle. Actually, the big man’s strength was almost spent as well, the mace in his hand moved very slowly.

Seeing the critical situation, the boy’s anger and hatred rose up again; throwing himself forward, he grabbed both of the big man’s legs and pulled backward with all of his might. The big man weighed at least two hundred catties, while the boy was small and skinny; normally, the boy would not be able to move

even half a hair of the big man’s. However, this moment the man was heavily injured, while he used the last ounce of his strength to move the weapon. With a sudden pull from the boy, his legs gave up; he fell down and lay still on a pool of blood.

Gasping for breath, the man on the bed laughed and said, “Come in and fight if you have guts!”

The boy shook his hand repeatedly, telling him not to provoke the people outside. But when the older man was thrown out of the room, his body bumped against the door, sending it swinging continuously. Illuminated by the candle light from the hall, the man’s dragon whisker and his face full of blood looked very mean and ferocious.

The crowd of salt smugglers in the hall was unclear of the real situation inside; they looked at each other in shock, only to hear the man inside shouted again, "Son of a b*tch, you don't dare to come in, the old man will come out and kill you one by one."

The crowd of salt smugglers cried out and lifted their wounded comrades lying on the floor, they bolted out the door. The man laughed aloud, and then lowering his voice he said, "Kid, go ... go bolt the door."

The boy thought the door definitely must be bolted. "Yes!" he hastily replied and bolted the door, then he slowly walked toward the bed. In the dark his nose caught the intermittent smell of blood.

The man said, "You ... you ..." but before he could finish, he slumped down; apparently he fainted. His body swayed and was about to fall off the bed. The boy quickly rushed forward to prop him up. This man's body was very heavy. The boy struggled hard to straighten him up and put his head on a pillow.

The man was breathing laboriously; a moment later he said in a low voice, "Those salt smugglers will come back in an instant,

my strength has yet to return, I must get ... get damn away from here."

Holding out his hand to stand up, he seemed to bump a sore spot for he groaned loudly. The boy quickly helped him up. The man said, "Pick the saber, give it to me!" The boy picked the saber from the floor and stuffed it into the man's right hand. The man slowly got up from the bed, his body was constantly swaying. The boy stepped forward and set his right shoulder underneath the man's left armpit.

"I am leaving," the man said, "Don't help me, otherwise if those salt smugglers saw you, they would kill you as well."

"Damn it," the boy said, "If they want to kill, just kill, I am not afraid. We, good friends, must uphold *yi qi* [loyalty, code of brotherhood], I cannot not help you."

The man burst out in laughter, mixed with several coughs. He said with a laugh, "You and I must uphold *yi qi*?"

"Why not?" the little boy replied, "Good friends enjoy blessings and endure misfortune together."

In the teahouses around Yangzhou, there were many storytellers; they told the story of the Three Kingdoms, the Water Margin, the Ming Dynasty’s 'Legend of Heroic Deeds', and all kinds of heroic tales. Day in and day out this little boy went in and out of brothels, casinos, teahouses and restaurants, running errands and buying things for the customers; by scrapping here and there, he was able to earn some money. Whenever he had free time, he would squat by the tea table listening to people telling stories. He always sweet-talked the teahouses' proprietors by calling them uncle this and uncle that, and thus the proprietors had never chased him away.

He had heard quite a few stories, and was extremely fascinated by the sagas of heroes and warriors of old. Seeing this man that albeit his heavy injury was able to defeat not a

few of salt smugglers, his heart was filled with admiration. Since the heroes in the story often said those words, he just blurted it out.

The man laughed aloud and said, “Those words are well said. In Jianghu *laozi* has heard it mentioned a thousand times, the fellows who enjoying blessing together seem to be many, but I haven’t seen too many of those who endure difficulties together. Let’s go!”

With his right shoulder the boy supported the man’s left arm; he opened the door and walked into the hall. When the people saw them, they were startled and scrambled away from them.

“Xiaobao, Xiaobao,” the boy’s mother called out, “Where are you going?”

“I am walking this friend out,” the boy replied, “I will be back soon.”

“This friend! Ha ha … now I have become your friend!” the man said with a laugh.

“Don’t go,” the boy’s mother called out, “You must quickly hide.” The boy laughed and walked away from the hall in big strides.

The two of them left Lovely Spring Courtyard and found the alley was surprisingly extremely quiet; presumably because they met a formidable opponent, the salt smugglers went back to call for reinforcement. As they left the alley and entered a small street ahead, the man looked up to the stars above and said, “Let’s go to the west.”

After walking for several *zhang* [unit of length, approximately 10 ft or 3 m], they came across a donkey cart. “Let’s rent a cart!” the man shouted. The driver halted. Seeing the two of them were covered in blood, his face showed astonishment and suspicion. The man took out a silver ingot from his pocket, about four or five *taels* [1 *tael* worth approximately 50 grams or

2 oz. of silver] worth. He said, “Take the money first!”

Seeing a quite valuable silver ingot, the driver stopped the cart immediately and put down the footboard. The man slowly heaved his body up on the cart. From his pocket he fished another *yuanbiao* [gold or silver ingot, shaped like a boat], worth ten *taels*, and gave it to the boy. He said, “Little friend, I am leaving. I give this *yuanbiao* to you.”

Seeing such a big *yuanbiao*, the boy could not help but mumbling indistinctly and swallowing his saliva, while thinking, “What a good guy!” However, he remembered many chivalrous tales he had heard and recalled that heroes and warriors only make friends, they do not love money. Today, after so many difficulties, he finally had a chance to become a hero; whatever happened, he must continue to the end, he cannot be a useless person who was greedy for money. Thereupon, with a loud voice he said, “We are speaking about *yi qi*, and not about money. If you give me the *yuanbiao*, you are considering me unworthy. You are injured, and I am going to send you off.”

The man was startled, but then he laughed to his heart’s content with his face to the sky. “Very good! Very good!” he said, “You meant well.” And he put the *yuanbiao* back into the pocket. The boy crawled up the cart and sat by his side.

“Mister, where do you want to go?” the cart driver asked.

“To the west of town,” the man replied, “The Victory Hill!”

“Victory Hill?” the cart driver was startled, “Going to the west of town in the dead of the night?”

“Exactly!” the man said, while lightly knocking his saber against the side of the cart.

The cart driver was scared, “Yes, yes!” he hastily said. Pulling down the cart’s curtain, he drove the donkey out of town. The man closed his eyes to rest, his breathing was short and heavy, sometimes he would cough several times.

Victory Hill was a large rural area about thirty *li* [unit of length, about 0.5 km or 1/3 of a mile] northwest of Yangzhou. During the Shaoxing years of the Southern Song Dynasty, Han Shizhong scored a major victory against the Jin army on this hill, hence the name ‘Victory’. The cart driver drove his donkey in great haste, in just over two hours they had reached the bottom of the hill. "Mister, we have arrived!" he said.

The man saw the hill was only seven, eight *zhang* high, it was only a knoll actually. "Pei!" he spat and asked, "Is this the damned Victory Hill?"

"It is," the cart driver said.

The boy also said, "This is indeed the Victory Hill. When my Ma and the sisters went to burn incense in the Madame Ying Lie [lit. 'heroic deed'] Temple, I came along and played in here. The Madame Ying Lie Temple is a bit farther ahead."

The Madame Ying Lie Temple was dedicated to Madame Han Shizhong, Liang Hongyu. Yangzhou residents called it 'Distinguished Prostitute Temple'. When she was young, Liang Hongyu[24] was a courtesan, and that was how she met Han Shizhong. Every year the courtesans of Yangzhou would visit the Madame Ying Lie Temple to burn incense and pray, asking the spirit of this mistress from Anguo, Hebei province, of the Song Dynasty, to look after the latter generation sisters of the same trade.

The man said, "Since you know it, it must be right. Get down."

The boy jumped down and then he helped the man stepped down the cart. It was pitch-black all around. The boy thought, "That's right, this is a desolate place. If we are hiding here, those salt smugglers will never find us."

The cart driver was afraid this man, whose body was covered in blood, would ask him to take him someplace else; pulling the

reins, he whipped the donkey to leave. "Hold it," the man said, "Take this little friend back to the city."

"Yes," the cart driver replied.

"Let me keep you company for a while," the boy said, "Early tomorrow morning I can buy some steamed buns for you to eat."

"Do you really want to stay with me?" the man asked.

"No one is taking care of you," the boy replied, "It won't be right otherwise."

The man roared in laughter again. "In that case," he said to the cart driver, "You may go!" The cart driver hurriedly urged the donkey to walk.

The man sat on a big rock. When the cart driver was out of sight, no more noise was heard all around. The man suddenly shouted, "Two bastard turtles behind the willow tree, roll out to *laozi* here!"

The boy jumped in fright. "Someone is here?" he mused. But then he saw two men walking slowly from behind the willow tree. Those two wore plain white band around their heads and dark green belt around their waists; obviously they belong to the salt smuggler gang.

The two men had flickering sabers in their hands. After taking only two steps, they halted. The man shouted, "Bastard son of turtles, you have been trailing your old man all the way from the pleasure house to this place; not coming out to deliver your life, what are you waiting for?"

The boy thought, "That's right, they are here to ascertain where we are, then they are going to send reinforcement to kill him."

The two men talked to each other in low voice, then suddenly they turned around and ran. The man quickly leaped to pursue.

"Ay!" he exclaimed, and fell sitting down. His injury was simply too heavy that he was incapable of running after those men.

The boy thought, "The donkey cart has already left, the two of us cannot go too far. If those two managed to spread the news, it would be terribly bad if a large number of troops come here to kill us." Suddenly he cried loudly, "Aiyo, why did you die? You must not die! You cannot die!"

The two salt smugglers were running like crazy, suddenly hearing the boy's cry, they were startled and halted their steps immediately, only to hear the boy crying out, "Why did you die?" They could not help but were pleasantly surprised. One of them wondered, "The evil thief died?" The other man replied, "His injury was very heavy, he could not bear it. The little demon is crying like that, I am sure he is really dead."

Looking from the distant, they saw the man curled up on the ground. The first man said, "Even if he is not dead yet, we need not be afraid of him. Let's chop his head and take it back; won't we render a great service that way?"

"Wonderful!" the other man agreed. With a saber in their hands, the two of them slowly came near.

The boy was wailing loudly while beating his chest and stomping his feet. "*Laoxiong*," he called out, "Why did you die suddenly? If those salt smugglers came back, how am I supposed to deal with them?"

The two men were greatly delighted, they leaped toward them. One of them said, "Evil thief, it is best that you die!" He grabbed the back of the boy's clothes, while the other man chopped his saber down on the man's neck.

Suddenly a saber flashed; one man's head flew up, while the other man who grabbed the boy had his chest and abdomen cut open from top to bottom. The man laughed aloud up stood up, propped by his saber.

The boy cried, "Aiyo, salt smuggler friend, how come your head is missing? The two of you, Seniors, are going to see Yan Wang [Yama, King of Hell]; who will come back to tell your friends? Isn't it terrible?" Crying to this part, he could not refrain from breaking out in laughter.

The man said with a laugh, "You, this little demon, are really smart, your crying is really convincing. If you did not cry like that, those two bastards would not come back."

The boy replied with a laugh, "What's so difficult about pretending to cry? When my Ma was about to beat me, before the whip even reach my body, I cried my heart out, that way the whip would not come down too heavily."

"Why would your mother want to beat you?" the man asked.

"It depends," the boy replied, "Sometimes it was because I stole her money, sometimes it was because I created trouble for the aunties or uncles."

The man sighed. "If I did not kill these two scouts, we will have a serious problem," he said. "Hey, when you cried just now, why didn't you call me 'master' or 'uncle', but you called me '*laoxiong*'?"

The boy said, "But you are my friend, of course I would call you 'friend'. What damned 'Master' are you? You want me to call you 'Master', what in the devil are you to me?"

The man roared in laughter. "Very good!' he said, "Little friend, what is your name?"

"Are you asking my honorable surname and my great name?" the boy replied, "I am called Xiaobao [lit. 'little treasure/precious']."

The man laughed, "Your great name is Xiaobao," he said, "What about your honorable surname?"

The boy knitted his eyebrows. "I ... my honorable surname is

Wei," he said.

He was born in a brothel, his mother's name was Wei Chunhua [lit. 'spring flower']. As for his father, even his own mother did not know who. Everybody called him Xiaobao, nobody had ever asked his surname before. This time the man asked, he simply blurted out his mother's surname. This Wei Xiaobao was born in a brothel and grew up in a brothel; he had never been to school. When mentioning his ‘honorable surname and great name’, he was not joking; it’s just that he often heard the storytellers mentioning the four words ‘honorable surname’ and ‘great name’, without realizing that it was a way of respectfully addressing other people, and thus it was inappropriate to be used to refer to oneself.

Following the example, he also asked, “What is your honorable surname and your great name then?”

The man smiled and said, “Since you are my friend, I should not hide my name from you. I am surnamed Mao, the ‘mao’ from ‘maocao’ [cogon grass], not the ‘mao’ from ‘maochong’ [caterpillar]. I am the eighteenth in rank, thus I am called Mao Shiba [eighteen].”

“Ah!” Wei Xiaobao exclaimed and jumped, “I have heard that the government … the government wants to arrest you?” he said, “They said you are a big robber[25] or something.”

Mao Shiba grunted and said, “That’s right, aren’t you afraid of me?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Afraid of what? So what if you are a big robber? Lin Chong, Wu Song, those heroes from the Water Margin were also big robbers.”

Mao Shiba was very happy. “You are comparing me with Lin Chong, Wu Song, those heroes; that’s wonderful!” he said, “Who told you that the government wants to arrest me?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “There are official announcements posted all around Yangzhou; it says that the big robber Mao Shiba is wanted, dead or alive. Whoever can kill you will be rewarded two thousand *taels*. If anybody can give information leading to your arrest, the reward is somewhat less, only a thousand *taels*. Yesterday I heard some people talking about it at the teahouse; they said that you possess such a great skill that whoever is thinking to arrest you or kill you should forget it. It is best if anybody knows your whereabouts and informs the authority, thus collecting the thousand *taels* reward, which actually is an ill-gotten gain anyway.”

Mao Shiba leaned his head sideways to look at him and snorted contemptuously. A thought flashed through Wei Xiaobao’s mind, “If I can collect this thousand *taels* reward, Ma and I, two people, will have enough money to spend: eating chicken, duck, fish and beef, gambling and fooling around; this money won’t be spent for several years.” Seeing Mao Shiba leaning his head looking at him with somewhat strange expression, Wei Xiaobao angrily said, “What are you thinking? You think I am going to report you for the reward?”

“Yes,” Mao Shiba admitted, “White and shiny silver, who does not love?”

“F*ck your granny,” Wei Xiaobao swore, “What Jianghu’s *yi qi* are you talking about?”

“It’s up to you,” Mao Shiba replied.

“Since you do not trust me, why did you tell me your real name?” Wei Xiaobao said, “Your head and your face are wrapped in that much bandage, you look completely different from the picture on the official announcement. If you did not say that you are Mao Shiba, who would recognize you?”

Mao Shiba said, “You said that we should enjoy blessings and endure misfortune together. If even my real name I conceal

from you, what kind of damn bastard friend am I?”

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, he said, “Absolutely correct! Even if there is a ten thousand *taels*, a hundred thousand *taels* reward, no way would *laozi* report you.” While in his heart he said, “If there really is a ten thousand *taels*, a hundred thousand *taels* reward, will I or won’t I betray a friend?” He was not so sure.

“Very well,” Mao Shiba said, “Let us sleep for a while, tomorrow at noon [orig. ‘wu shi’, between 11am-1pm] there will be two friends coming for me. We have an appointment to meet at the Victory Hill west of Yangzhou; even if I am dead, I won’t leave before we meet.” Wei Xiaobao had been running around for the whole day, he was already tired early on. As soon as he heard him, he leaned against a tree trunk and fell asleep.

When he woke the next day, he saw Mao Shiba was pressing both his hands against his chest; he said with a laugh, “You are awake. Drag these two dead men behind the tree, and sharpen these three sabers.”

Wei Xiaobao pulled the dead bodies as told. The morning sun had just appeared, it was only now that he was able to see clearly: Mao Shiba was roughly forty years of age, his hands and arms were bulging with muscle, his eyes were bright, his expression was bold and powerful. He took the three sabers to a mountain stream nearby, dipped the saber into the water, and then sharpened it on a rock. He thought, “To deal with the salt smugglers, one saber is enough. Supposing this Mao *Laoxiong* is killed, why do I have to sharpen the other two? So that other people can use it to kill Wei Xiaobao?” He was always lazy, after putting an act of sharpening the blades for some time, he said, “Let me go buy some deep-fried breadstick and steamed buns for us to eat.”

“Where would you buy some deep-fried breadstick and steamed buns?” Mao Shiba asked.

"There's a small town over there, not too far from here," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Mao *Dage*, may I borrow two *taels* of your money?"

Mao Shiba chuckled; taking out the big *yuanbiao* from his pocket, he said, "We are brothers, what's yours is mine, what's mine is yours, you can just use mine, there is no need to say the word 'borrow'."

Wei Xiaobao was delighted, he thought, "This hero indeed considers me as a friend; even if there is a ten-thousand *taels* of reward, I simply cannot report him to the authority. But what about a hundred thousand? Now that is going to be a problem. Pei! Just look at him, will he worth that much money? I don't need to think too much." Receiving the money, he asked, "Do you want me to buy you some medicine?"

"No need," Mao Shiba said, "I have my own medicine."

"Alright, I am leaving," Wei Xiaobao said, "Mao *Dage*, don't worry, supposing I am caught by the authorities, even if they kill me, I will never tell them that you are Mao Shiba." Hearing the sincerity in his voice, Mao Shiba nodded. Wei Xiaobao muttered to himself, "You will have two friends coming over, I'd better buy a pot of wine, and several catties of cooked beef."

Mao Shiba happily said, "Nothing's better than wine and meat; go quickly and return quickly. I can kill better with a full stomach."

Wei Xiaobao was startled, "Do the salt smugglers know you are here?" he asked, "Are they after you?"

"It's not that," Mao Shiba said, "I have an appointment to fight with someone on the Victory Hill. Otherwise, why would I rush to this place?"

Wei Xiaobao let out a breath. "You are still injured," he said, "How can you fight? Why do you have to keep the appointment? It won't be too late to wait until you recover, it's

just that ... it's just that I am afraid the other party won't agree to it."

"Pei!" Mao Shiba spat, "The other party is a famous hero and warrior, why won't he agree? It's me who is unwilling. Today is the twenty-ninth day of the third month, isn't it? Half a year ago, the appointment has been decided. Afterwards I was caught by the authorities and was put in jail. I was concerned over this appointment, I have to keep it; hence I had to break out from jail and in the process killed several Eagle Claw's[26] grandsons, only then was the city of Yangzhou thrown into a complete mess, and so they put up some damn posters to arrest *laozi*. His granny, just the day before yesterday I came across several Eagle Claw's kids, whose martial art skill was very strong. I killed three of them, but unexpectedly I also suffered a bit of injury in the process; just consider it my bad luck."

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "I will hurry to buy something to eat. When you are full, you may fight." He started to run immediately. Rounding the hillside, he rushed for six, seven *li* before reaching a small town. He made a plan in his heart, "Mao *Dage* cannot even walk from his wound, how can he fight? He said the opposite party is a famous hero and warrior, his martial art skill must be good; what can I do to help him?"

With the money in his hand, his heart was itching unbearably; in all his life, he had never held that much money, he knew he would not be happy unless he spend it all. Going to a grocer, he bought two catties of cooked beef, a duck marinated in soy paste, and two bottles of yellow wine. He still had quite a bit of money left. With it he bought a dozen steamed buns, and eight strips of deep-fried breadstick, at most it was only twenty-some *wen*. Suddenly he had an idea, "Why don't I buy a roll of rope? I can put some horse-tripping rope on the ground. When they fight, if the opponent is not careful, he may trip on the rope and

fall down, then Mao *Dage* can chop him with his saber."

He remembered a storyteller once told a story about a general who went to battle, his horse was tripped and he fell down, the enemy general raised his saber and chopped down the man into two pieces. In high spirit he went to buy the rope. When he reached the general store, however, he saw a row of four big vats in the store; one contained rice, the next one soy bean, the next one salt, and the last one contained small chunks of lime. Right away he recalled, "Last year, when gangs of salt smugglers fought by the Fairy Bridge, someone threw lime at their eyes and turned defeat into victory at once; why didn't I think about it earlier?" Therefore, he did not buy rope, but a bag of lime instead, and returned to Mao Shiba.

Mao Shiba was lying by a tree, sleeping; hearing his footsteps, he woke up immediately. Opening a wine bottle, he took two mouthfuls and loudly praised it. "Aren't you going to drink?" he asked.

Wei Xiaobao had never had wine before, but since he was acting as a hero or warrior, he took the bottle and took a mouthful. He felt a rush of heat bubbling up his stomach and he coughed immediately. Mao Shiba roared in laughter and said, "Little hero has not learned drinking wine skill."

Suddenly from a distant someone was calling out loud and clear, "Shiba *Xiong*, are you well since we parted?"

"Wu *Xiong*, Wang *Xiong*," Mao Shiba called back, "You two also look very well!"

Wei Xiaobao's heart was pounding. He looked up to the direction of the voice, and saw two men were walking quickly along the main road, whom very soon had arrived in front of them. One was an old man, with long white beard hanging in front of chest, yet his countenance was ruddy and bright, without any wrinkle at all. The other one was a middle-aged

man in his forties, short and stout. His head was bald, with a small braid hanging from the back of his head, his forehead looked like a hard-boiled egg without its shell.

Mao Shiba raised his cupped fist and said, "*Xiongdi* [generic term for 'brother'; referring to self] is inconvenienced on the legs, cannot stand up to pay my respect."

The bald man slightly frowned. The old man laughed and said, "Why be polite?"

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Mao *Dage* is too honest, why must he tell people his legs are injured?"

"We have wine and meat here," Mao Shiba said, "Would the two of you eat a little bit?"

"Thank you for your hospitality," the old man replied. Sitting next to Mao Shiba, he took the wine bottle.

Wei Xiaobao was delighted. "Turns out these two are Mao *Dage*'s friends, they are here not to fight with him," he thought, "That's wonderful! When the enemy arrives, these two may help him fight."

As the old man brought the bottle to his lips, the bald man said, "Wu *Dage*, you must not drink this wine!"

The old man was startled, but he laughed immediately, he said, "Shiba *Xiong* is a firm and frank good man, how can there be any poison in the wine?" 'Glug, glug' he drank two mouthfuls of wine, and then handed the bottle to the bald man and said, "If you don't drink the wine, you are holding a good friend in contempt."

Hesitation flashed on the bald man's face, but it was inappropriate for him to defy the old man's words, thereupon he received the wine bottle. He was just about to bring the bottle to his mouth when Mao Shiba suddenly reached out and snatched the bottle away, saying, "We don't have much wine!

Since Wang *Xiong* does not like to drink wine, save several mouthfuls for me." Raising the bottle, he poured two mouthfuls of wine into his mouth. The bald man's face turned red; he sat down and grabbed some beef and started to eat.

Mao Shiba said, "Let me introduce you to a good friend of mine." Pointing toward the old man, he said, "This is Wu *Laoyezi* [Old Master Wu], his title is Dapeng [lit. ‘the Great Roc’], in Jianghu he is known as 'Cloud Scraper Hand'. His punching and kicking skill is very famous."

The old man laughed and said, "Mao *Xiong* has painted gold on my face." Looking all around, he did not see any other people, hence he was rather astonished.

Mao Shiba pointed to the bald man and said, "This is Wang *Shifu* [respectful form of

address for older men], whose given name is a single character 'Tan'; his nickname is 'A Pair of Pens Cut Into a Mountain'. His skill in using a pair of judge-pens has truly reached perfection."

"Mao *Xiong* is making fun of me," the bald man said, "I have been defeated under your hands, I am really ashamed."

"You flatter me," Mao Shiba said. Pointing toward Wei Xiaobao he said, "This young friend is my newly found brother ..." Listening to this point, Wu and Wang, two people were startled. They looked at each other, and then turned their gaze toward Wei Xiaobao. In all honesty they could not figure out the background of this skinny twelve, thirteen years old boy. In the meantime, Mao Shiba continued, "This young friend is surnamed Wei, given name Xiaobao. In Jianghu he is known as ... known as, um, his nickname is ... is ..." After pausing for a moment, he said, "He is known as the Little White Dragon. His water skill is superb, he can stay in the water for three days and three nights, live on fish and shrimp, and his face will not

change.”

He wanted to give this new friend some face, so that he would not appear discouraged in front of strangers, hence he had a mind to boast somewhat. However, Wei Xiaobao did not know any martial art, while Wu and Wang, two people were martial art experts, they would know from his voice or his movements, so it would be hard to deceive them. After thinking for a moment, Mao Shiba decided to say that Wei Xiaobao’s water skill was truly formidable. Wu and Wang, two people, were northern warriors, they did not know their way around the water, hence they would not know the genuine from the fake. He then said, “The three of you are good friends, you should know each other better.”

Wu and Wang, two people, raised their cupped fist and said, “It’s an honor to meet you at last!”

Wei Xiaobao simply copied what they were doing, he also raised his cupped fist and said, “It’s an honor to meet you at last!” While inwardly he was pleasantly surprised, “Mao *Dage* brags on my behalf, what kind of Jianghu warrior am I? I am sure this trickery will be exposed later.”

With the four of them, the wine, meat and steamed buns were finished in no time. The bald Wang Tan’s appetite was really good; at first he was rather shy, but later on he started to take big bites. The amount of beef, steamed buns and deep-fried breadsticks he alone ate was more than the other three people combined.

Mao Shiba used the sleeve of his clothes to wipe his mouth. “Wu *Laoyezi*,” he said, “This young friend’s water skill is fabulous, but he has not learned his land’s skill yet. Without any choice I will have to fight you one against two; it is not because I am looking down on the two of you.”

Wu Dapeng said, “I’ll say our appointment can be postponed

another half a year.”

“And why is that?” Mao Shiba asked.

Wu Dapeng said, “Mao *Xiong* is injured, obviously you cannot unleash you true skill. If the old man defeats you, there is no glory in that; if I am defeated, I won’t have any face to see other people even more.”

Mao Shiba laughed aloud and said, “Injured or not, there is not much difference. If I have to wait another half a year, won’t I be anxious even more?” With left hand pressed against the tree trunk for support, he slowly stood up; his right hand already held his saber. “Wu *Laoyezi* has always been bare-handed,” he said, “Wang *Xiong*, pull your weapon!”

“Very well,” Wang Tan said. Both hands entered his pocket, ‘clang!’ he pulled out a pair of judge-pens.

Wu Dapeng said, “In that case, Wang *Xiandi* [‘worthy (younger) brother’], please give your humble brother an opportunity to have a try first. If I fail, it won’t be too late for you to try.”

“Yes!” Wang Tan complied, and retreated three steps.

With left palm upturned and right hand moved in circle, light as a feather Wu Dapeng delivered a strike toward Mao Shiba. Mao Shiba’s saber hacked down diagonally, lightly chopped Wu Dapeng’s left arm. Wu Dapeng lowered his head, and quickly came in under the blade, with his left hand slapped under Mao Shiba’s right elbow. Mao Shiba leaned sideways and dodged behind the tree. 'Slap!' Wu Dapeng's palm struck the tree trunk. The tree was about five, six *zhang* tall, the trunk was thick and solid, yet Wu Dapeng's palm strike had made the yellow leaves of the tree fall down like rain.

"Good palm strength!" Mao Shiba called out. His saber cut horizontally across Wu Dapeng's waist. Wu Dapeng suddenly leaped up and from the air pounced down, his white beard

floating; it was a wonderful sight. Mao Shiba countered with ‘Westerly Wind Rolling In’, his saber swept up from below. Wu Dapeng made a somersault in the air and leaped away. Mao Shiba's saber was less than half a foot from his abdomen. The saber was no doubt swift and fierce, but the way Wu Dapeng evaded it was also swift and brilliant.

Wei Xiaobao had seen too many fights in his life, but it was all marketplace brawls where the rogues butting head with each other, kicking and pulling the opponent's braid, wrestling and beating each other randomly. Other than Mao Shiba's fierce battle with the salt smugglers at the Lovely Spring Courtyard the previous day, he had never seen martial art masters dueling each other in such a dangerous competition.

He saw Wu Dapeng advancing and retreating in quick successions, his palms danced, while Mao Shiba brandished his saber in front of his body like a silvery light shield. Several times did Wu Dapeng press in, but each time he was pushed back by the saber light.

In the midst of intense battle, suddenly they heard hoof beats as about a dozen riders came galloping by; they were all dressed in Manchurian Qing military attire. When they were near, those dozen or so soldiers spread out and surrounded these four men in the middle. The leader shouted sternly, "Don't move! We have an order to arrest the Big Robber Mao Shiba. It has nothing to do with anybody else, please step away!"

Hearing this, Wu Dapeng held his palms. Mao Shiba said, "Wu *Laoyezi*, the Eagle Claws have arrived! They are coming for me, you don't need to pay attention, let's continue our fight!"

Wu Dapeng turned toward the soldiers and said, "This *Xiongtai* [brother, generic term] here is a law-abiding common person, how can he be the Big Robber? You mistook him as someone else."

The leader laughed coldly and said, "He is a law-abiding common person, too bad there are too many law-abiding common people in the world. Friend Mao, you have committed a horrendous crime in Yangzhou. A real man is always responsible for what he did. Come follow us nicely!"

"Just wait a moment," Mao Shiba said, "Wait until victory or defeat between me and these two friends is decided, then we'll talk." Turning toward Wu Dapeng and Wang Tan he said, "Wu *Laoyezi*, Wang *Xiong*, we must decide victory or defeat today, if you want to wait for another half a year, I don't know if I, the one surnamed Mao, will still alive. In short, why don't the two of you come together?"

The leader shouted, "If the two of you are not Mao Shiba's accomplices, leave this place at once, do not get involved in this matter."

"Your granny," Mao Shiba said, "What are these shouting and screaming for?"

"Mao Shiba," the leader said, "You broke out of jail and killed people, that was the local authority's business, we need not take notice of it. But I heard that in a brothel you were yelling and boasting that the traitors of Tian Di Hui, who started a rebellion, are heroes and warriors; did you or did you not say such thing?"

Mao Shiba loudly said, "Of course the friends of Tian Di Hui are heroes and warriors; are you saying that people like you, traitors of the Hans who lick the imperial court’s eggs, are heroes and warriors?”

The leader’s eyes flashed a murderous look; he said, “Ao *Shaobao* [Oboi, see Chapter 1] sends us from Beijing to the south exactly to arrest the Tian Di Hui rebels. Mao Shiba, come with us.” While saying that, he turned toward Wu Dapeng and Wang Tan, he said, “The two of you were fighting with this

traitor and bandit, presumably you are not his accomplice. You may leave."

Wu Dapeng said, "May I know your honorable surname and great name?"

The leader proudly patted the shiny black flexible whip wound around his waist and said, "I am the Black Dragon Whip Shi Song, on assignment from Ao *Shaobao* to capture Tian Di Hui rebels."

Wu Dapeng nodded; he turned to Mao Shiba and said, "Mao *Xiong*, by Heaven my father and Earth my mother!"

With eyes wide open Mao Shiba asked, "What did you say?"

"Nothing," Wu Dapeng smiled and said, "Mao *Xiong*, you probably are not a Tian Di Hui brother, but why did you speak well of Tian Di Hui?"

"Tian Di Hui protects common people and kills traitors, they are doing heroes and warriors' work, naturally they are heroes and warriors," Mao Shiba said, "There is a saying in Jianghu: 'Whoever never knew Chen Jinnan, he calls himself a hero in vain.' Chen Jinnan, Chen *Zongduozhu* [see note 14 Chapter 1], is the leader of Tian Di Hui. All Tian Di Hui friends are working under Chen *Zongduozhu*, how can there be anyone who is not a hero and warrior?"

Wu Dapeng asked, "Mao *Xiong*, have you met Chen *Zongduozhu*?"

"What?" Mao Shiba angrily said, "Are you saying I am not a hero and warrior?" Since he was that angry, apparently he had never met Chen Jinnan.

Wu Dapeng smiled, "I do not dare to presume," he said.

Mao Shiba said, "Are you saying you have met Chen *Zongduozhu*?" Wu Dapeng shook his head.

Shi Song asked Wu and Wang, two people, “Do you know any Tian Di Hui people? If you have any information that will lead to the arrest of Tian Di Hui leader, that Chen Jinnan or whatever his name is, Oboi will certainly heap you with rewards.”

Wu Dapeng and Wang Tan had not replied, Mao Shiba laughed aloud with his face to the sky; he said, “You mother’s dreaming a big dream in a clear autumn day; a lump of brick like you wants to arrest Tian Di Hui’s Chen *Zongduozhu*? You keep saying Ao *Shaobao* this and Ao *Shaobao* that; this Oboi calls himself the number one warrior or Manchuria, how is his martial art skill anyway?”

Shi Song said, “Ao *Shaobao* is supernaturally brave, his martial art skill matchless. Once on a Beijing street he killed a mad bull with his fist; do you, a traitor, also know about it?”

“His granny,” Mao Shiba swore, “I don’t believe Oboi is that formidable, I am just about to go to Beijing to challenge him.”

With a cold laugh Shi Song said, “Are you worthy to fight with Ao *Shaobao*? The Senior only needs to extend one finger and you will be a dead man. The one surnamed Mao, we have talked enough nonsense, come follow us!”

“You think it’s that easy?” Mao Shiba replied, “You have thirteen men; *laozi* will fight one against thirteen. Even though I know I am not your match, I will still fight you.”

Wu Dapeng laughed and said, “Why does Mao *Xiong* consider us as outsiders? We have here three against thirteen; one man takes four, we may not necessarily lose.”

Both Shi Song and Mao Shiba were stunned. Shi Song said, “The two of you must not have a change of mind and make a mistake; committing treason by helping a rebel is not a fun thing to do.”

Wu Dapeng laughed and said, “If you say we are helping a rebel, so be it; but to commit treason, that we do not dare.”

Shi Song said, “Helping a rebel is committing treason! You two think carefully, are you determined to help this traitor?”

Wu Dapeng said, “Half a year ago, Mao *Xiong* and this Wang *Xiongdi* here made an appointment for a friendly duel in this place, it has nothing to do with me. Unexpectedly the government authority was not sensible enough by locking this Mao *Xiong* in jail. He is a good man of his words; if he did not keep this appointment today, how would he conduct himself in Jianghu in the future? So it was because he was forced by the government authority that he broke out of jail and killed people. It is called the government official drives the people to revolt, he has no choice but to rebel. Shi *Daren*, if you would give *laohan* [‘the old man’, referring to self] a face, please take your squad back, let *laohan* and Mao *Xiong* have a competition to measure their martial art skills. Whether you are going to arrest him tomorrow, *laohan* and Wang *Xiongdi* will not care!”

“No, can’t do,” Shi Song said.

One of the soldiers suddenly shouted, “Old fellow, you speak too much already!” While saying that, he pulled out his saber and squeezed his legs to spur the horse; raising his saber, he chopped it down on the top of Wu Dapeng’s head. Wu Dapeng tilted his body to evade the saber, his right arm reached out while leaping up at the same time to grab the soldier’s back. With one smooth motion he threw the soldier to the ground.

The rest of the soldiers cried out, “Revolt! Revolt!” and jumped down their mounts to surround Wu Dapeng, three people. Mao Shiba’s legs were injured, he was still leaning on the tree, but he lifted his saber and hacked down a soldier to his death. The saber pared across and cut another soldier’s waist, sending him to his death. Seeing his ferocity, the rest of the soldiers did not dare to close in. With hands on his waist, Shi Song sat on the horseback, watching.

At first Wei Xiaobao was also at the center of the

encirclement, but when Shi Shong was still talking to Mao Shiba and Wu Dapeng, step by step he walked away. The soldiers did not know what this skinny and shriveled kid was doing in that place, so they did not pay him any attention. When the fight broke, he hid behind a tree several *zhang* away. "Shall I go now, or shall I stay and watch?" he asked himself, "Mao *Dage* only has three on their side, they will be killed by this soldiers for sure. After that, will these soldiers come and kill me as well?" But then he had a second thought, "Mao *Dage* considers me as his good friend, we should enjoy blessings and endure misfortune together. If I sneak out quietly, I am not holding up *yi qi*."

With a sweep of his palm, Wu Dapeng struck down a soldier. Wielding his pair of judge pens, Wang Tan fought three soldiers. By this time Mao Shiba had chopped down another soldier's right leg. The soldier fell down on his own pool of blood, cursing and swearing loudly, his voice was sad and shrill.

Shi Shong let out a loud and long cry; with the Black Dragon Whip in his hand, he also jumped down his mount. Before his feet landed on the ground, the tip of his whip had already coiled toward Mao Shiba. Mao Shiba unleashed the saber technique 'Five Tigers Breaking the Gates' to counter move for move. Shi Song lashed out his flexible whip seven, eight times in succession with formidable stances, but Mao Shiba countered each and every one with his saber.

Suddenly Wu Dapeng shouted loudly, one soldier flew up and 'Bang!' he fell to the ground. The number of soldiers was reduced by one. On the other front, Wang Tan was fighting one against three, he gradually fell under a disadvantageous position, his left leg had been gashed by a sawtooth saber; blood gushed out of his wound, yet while limping and soaked in blood, he was still fighting hard.

The three soldiers who fought with Wu Dapeng were not weak

either; two sabers and one sword were weaving in and out around his body, Wu Dapeng's Cloud Scraper Hand failed to land on their bodies.

Shi Song's flexible whip moved faster and faster, yet all along he was unable to subdue Mao Shiba. Suddenly he launched the stance 'White Snake Spitting At Will', the tip of his whip went straight toward Mao Shiba's right shoulder. Mao Shiba raised his saber to block; to his surprise, however, Shi Song's attack was an empty move, with a flick of his wrist, the former move, 'Make a Sound in the East and Strike in the West' changed into 'Jade Belt Wrapped Around the Waist', where the Black Dragon Whip was lashing to the left, but then immediately coiled back to the right to wrap itself around Mao Shiba's waist.

Mao Shiba's legs could walk only with difficulty, all along he was standing against a big tree for support. As Shi Song's attack, the 'Jade Belt Wrapped Around the Waist' arrived, he should have either dash forward or leap backward, since it was the only way to evade. But now he had no choice but to take the attack head-on; 'Crack!' he struck the tip of the whip with his saber that it fell down. Shi Song shook his whip loose. As the whip handle was loose, the whip dropped slightly, but suddenly it coiled up again, with an unimaginable speed it wrapped itself around Mao Shiba and the tree trunk; altogether it circled three times around. 'Stab!' the tip of the whip hit Mao Shiba's right chest.

Shi Song wanted to capture Mao Shiba alive so he could interrogate him on the Tian Di Hui. Seeing Wu Dapeng and Wang Tan had not surrendered, he was eager to retrieve the Black Dragon Whip, thereupon he stooped down to pick up a discarded saber on the ground with the intention of chopping Mao Shiba's right arm. With the saber in his hand, he was just about to straighten up his body when a white cloud swayed in front of his eyes, countless fine powder assaulted his eyes, his

nose, and his mouth. Instantly he choked up, followed by burning pain on his eyes, as if they were pricked by ten thousand steel needles at once. He wanted to open up his mouth to shout, but it was filled with the powder, even his throat seized up that no sound came out of his mouth. This mishap happened so suddenly that although he was a veteran of Jiang Hu, he was panic-stricken. Dropping the saber in his hand, he raised both hands to rub his eyes. After rubbing for a while, he suddenly realized, “Aiyo! The enemy scattered lime on my eyes!” Raw lime would boil in contact with water, immediately his eyes were burning. Right this moment, he felt an ice-cold sensation on his abdomen; a saber had penetrated his belly.

When the whip wrapped his body, Mao Shiba had lost all hope. Suddenly he saw white dust fly upward, Shi Song’s saber dropped down, both hands were rubbing his eyes. While still in shock, he saw Wei Xiaobao pick up the saber and with both hands thrust it into Shi Song’s abdomen, and immediately dashed away to hide behind a tree.

Shi Song’s hands were shaky, he staggered and swayed several turns, then tumbled face down on the ground. Several soldiers were greatly shocked, they called out together, “Shi *Dage*! Shi *Dage*!”

Wu Dapeng moved his left palm in ‘Iron Tree Blooming’, concentrating his power in the palm, sending a soldier flying several *zhang* away, spurting blood from his mouth. The remaining five soldiers knew they were lost, and were not in the mood to prolong the battle. They turned around and fled, forgetting even their own horses.

Wu Dapeng turned around and said, “Mao *Xiong*'s skill is indeed superb, this Black Dragon Whip Shi Song's martial art skill is superior, yet today he lost his life in your hand!" He saw that Shi Song died with a saber in his abdomen, so he assumed

it came from Mao Shiba's hand.

Mao Shiba shook his head and said, "I am ashamed! It was Wei *Xiaoxiongdi* [little/younger brother (generic term)] who killed him."

Wu and Wang, two people were greatly amazed, "The little kid killed him?" they asked. Just now they were busy fighting the enemy, so they did not see Wei Xiaobao throw the lime. The ground was covered with blood, since before his death Shi Song was rolling around on the ground, his body was covered with mud; although there were traces of lime on the ground, they had not paid attention.

With his left hand Mao Shiba grabbed the tip of the Black Dragon Whip and shook it off. 'Whoosh!' he lashed the whip on Shi Song's head. Although his abdomen was penetrated by the saber, Shi Song did not die immediately; as his crown was struck with the whip, his life was gone instantly. "Wei *Xiongdi*," Mao Shiba called out, "What a good skill!"

Wei Xiaobao came out from behind the tree. Realizing that he had killed a famous government official, 10% of his heart was proud of himself, but the other 90% was afraid. Half believing half doubting, Wu and Wang, two people looked at him from top to bottom, sizing him up. They noticed his countenance was pale, his body trembled, his eyes brimming with tears, his legs shaky as if he was about to fall. He also looked like he was about to cry, or perhaps he was going to call, 'I want my mommy!'. In any case, they could not believe he killed the Black Dragon Whip Shi Song.

"*Xiaoxiongdi*," Wu Dapeng said, "With what style did you kill this man?"

With a trembling voice Wei Xiaobao said, "I ... I ... killed this of ... officer? No, it wasn't me. No ... not me ..." He knew that killing a government official was a capital offense; panic-

stricken, the only thing he could think of was to deny.

Mao Shiba frowned; he shook his head and said, "Wu *Laoyezi*, Wang *Xiong*, I owe you for helping me in critical time and saving my life. Shall we continue fighting?"

"What saving your life? It is not worth mentioning," Wu Dapeng replied, "Wang *Xiongdi*, I think we do not need to continue fighting."

"No, we don't!" Wang Tan said, "Mao *Xiongdi* and I did not have either deep enmity or grudges to begin with. Why don't we all become friends? Mao *Xiongdi*'s martial art skill is superior, he has guts, and has knowledge and experience; I admire him wholeheartedly."

Wu Dapeng said, "Mao *Xiong*, we say goodbye now. The mountain is long, the river is far, we will meet again someday. Mao *Xiongdi* admires Tian Di Hui's Chen *Zongduozhu* very much, I will do my best to convey your words to Chen *Zongduozhu*."

Mao Shiba was elated, he took a step forward and said, "You ... you ... you know Chen *Zongduozhu*?"

Wu Dapeng laughed and said, "Actually, Wang *Xiongdi* and I are humble members of the Great Transformation Hall of the Tian Di Hui. Since Mao *Dage* has such a high esteem to our humble society, even if we have had serious enmity between us, we will definitely write it off, much less we did not have any grudges to begin with."

Mao Shiba was pleasantly surprised, "Turns out ... turns out you really knew Chen Jinnan."

"Our society brethrens are numerous, Chen *Zongduozhu*'s whereabouts is uncertain," Wu Dapeng said, "My position in the society is low, I really have not seen Chen *Zongduozhu* personally. I was not trying to deceive you a moment ago."

"So that's how it is," Mao Shiba said.

Wu Dapeng raised his cupped fist and turned around to leave. His palms did not stop striking here and there. A continuous 'Slap! Slap!' was heard, he struck the soldiers lying on the ground one by one; regardless of whether the soldier was dead or alive, after being hit by his Cloud Scraping Palm, the dead soldiers' tendon would be broken tendon and their bones crushes, those who were still alive would take his last breath instantly. In a low voice Mao Shiba mumbled, "What a palm strength!"

When the two of them had left far, he muttered to himself, "Turns out they are Tian Di Hui people." A few moments later, he turned to Wei Xiaobao and said, "Go get me a horse!"

Wei Xiaobao had never been near a horse before; seeing the horse was big and tall, he was scared, so he slowly approached the horse from its back.

"Stay in front of the horse," Mao Shiba bellowed, "If you approach a horse from its butt, it will kick you!"

Wei Xiaobao circled to the horse's head and put out his hand to pull the reins. Fortunately the horse was docile, it followed him obediently. Mao Shiba tore a piece of his own clothes to bind the wound on his right arm. Pressing the saddle with his left hand, he jumped onto the horseback. "Go home!" he said.

"Where are you going?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Why do you ask?" Mao Shiba replied.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Since we are friends, of course I have to ask."

Mao Shiba's countenance fell, "Your granny," he swore, "Who's your friend?"

Wei Xiaobao took a step back, his small face turned completely red, tears rolled down from his eyes; he did not

understand why one moment Mao Shiba was fine, the next moment he was very angry. Mao Shiba asked, "Why did you throw lime on Shi Song's eyes?" His voice was stern, his expression looked even more frightening.

Wei Xiaobao was really scared; he took another step backward. "I ... I saw he was about to kill you." His voice trembled.

"Where did you get the lime from?" Mao Shiba asked.

"I ... I bought it," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"Why did you buy it?" Mao Shiba pressed.

Wei Xiaobao said, "You said you were about to fight people, and I know you are injured, so ... so I bought the lime powder to help you."

Mao Shiba was really angry. "Little bastard!" he cursed, "Your granny, where did you learn such trick from?"

Wei Xiaobao's mother was a prostitute, nobody knew who his biological father was, so what he hated most was for people to call him 'little bastard'. His anger flared, he also cursed, "Your granny's old bastard, f*ck your seventeen, eighteen generations of Mao's bastard ancestors. Turtle bastard, why do you care where I learned the trick from? Stinky turtle, to your death nothing will ever get through your old turtle head ..." While his mouth was swearing, his feet was running to hide behind a tree.

Mao Shiba squeezed his legs, the horse jumped forward, his long arm reached out to grab the back of Wei Xiaobao's neck. Lifting him up, he roared, "Little demon, let's see if you can still curse!"

Wei Xiaobao's legs kicked randomly in the air, he called out, "You are a thief bastard, stinky turtle, a road kill, a swine that has been cut in a thousand pieces ..." He grew up in a brothel,

and thus had learned countless cursing words of all dialects from north to south. This time he was really angry, so filthy speech flowed out of his mouth effortlessly.

Mao Shiba was getting more upset. 'Whack!' he slapped Wei Xiaobao's face really hard! Wei Xiaobao screamed and wailed, his cursing was getting filthier and filthier. Suddenly he opened his mouth and bit the back of Mao Shiba's hand as hard as he could. In pain Mao Shiba tossed him down on the ground. Wei Xiaobao quickly stood up and ran, while his mouth did not stop shouting obscenity. Mao Shiba unhurriedly followed on horseback. Although Wei Xiaobao was not slow, his stature was small and his legs were short; how could he possibly beat a running horse? Only about a dozen of *zhang* later he was out of breath and was quite exhausted, but when he turned his head to look, Mao Shiba's horse was only less than a *zhang* away. In his panic he tripped and fell down on the ground. Since he was already down on the ground, he continued rolling away while wailing and screaming loudly. Having lived in a brothel and on the street, he was accustomed to fighting. Whenever he was not the opponent's match, he would usually resort to this trick. If the opponent was an adult, they would simply shake their heads and leave.

"Get up," Mao Shiba said, "I have something to talk to you."

"I won't get up," Wei Xiaobao wailed, "Even if I have to die in here I will not get up!"

"Fine," Mao Shiba said, "I'll just let the horse loose to trample you to death!"

Wei Xiaobao had never taken anybody's threat seriously. If someone said, 'I will beat you to death', 'I will kick you to death' or something of that nature, he was almost always able to escape unscathed only to hear it once or twice more; therefore, he had never placed such threat in his heart. Immediately he screamed, "Somebody is beating me to death!

There's an adult bullying a child! A turtle bastard riding a horse is going to trample me to death!"

Mao Shiba pulled the reins, the horse reared up on its hind legs until it almost stand vertically up. Wei Xiaobao rolled away to evade. Mao Shiba laughed and swore, "Little demon, you are scared!"

Wei Xiaobao shouted back, "I am scared of a dog sh*t like you, not a hero and a warrior!"

Seeing his unyielding spirit, Mao Shiba could not continue his act any longer; he laughed and said, "And you are a hero and a warrior? Alright, get up. I won't beat you anymore, see, I am stepping away!"

Wei Xiaobao stood up. With face full of tears and nasal mucus he said, "I don't care if you hit me, but never call me 'little bastard'."

Mao Shiba said with a laugh, "Your swearing is ten times worse than mine, ten times filthier than mine. Let's just say we are even."

Wei Xiaobao wiped his eyes with his hand and instantly turned tears into laughter. "You slapped my face, I bit your hand. Let's just say we are even. Where are you going?" he asked.

"I want to go to Beijing," Mao Shiba replied.

"Beijing?" Wei Xiaobao wondered, "You are wanted by the authority, why do you want to deliver yourself to their gate?"

"I always hear that Oboi is Manchu's number one warrior," Mao Shiba replied, "Damn it, some others say that he is the world's number one warrior. I don't believe it. I want to go to Beijing to prove it myself."

Hearing that he wanted to challenge Manchu's number one warrior, Wei Xiaobao knew he did not want to miss this exciting event. Day in and day out at the teahouses he heard the

guests mentioning all kinds of stories about Beijing, the Son of Heaven's domain, his heart was already filled with envy. He also thought that since he had killed Shi Song, the local authority's follow-up investigation would not be fun. Although most of the blame would fall on Mao Shiba, there was still one in ten thousand chance that his trickery would be exposed, and then he would be in deep trouble. In any case, he would be extremely lucky if he could simply slip away. Thereupon he said, "Mao *Dage*, can I ask you a favor? But this matter is definitely not easy, I am afraid you won't dare to agree."

What Mao Shiba hated most was for others to call him a coward; his anger flared at once as he cursed, "Your granny! Little ..." he was about to blurt out 'Little Bastard', but was able to stop his mouth in time. He said, "Why would I not dare to agree? Speak up, I will definitely agree." He also remembered that he owed his life to Wei Xiaobao, so even if it was an immensely difficult matter, he simply must help him.

Wei Xiaobao said, “A real man gave his words, some horses cannot pull it back. Once you agreed, you must not go back.”

“I definitely won’t,” Mao Shiba promised.

“Alright,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Take me to Beijing.”

“You want to go to Beijing?” Mao Shiba was surprised, “What for?”

“I want to see your duel with that Oboi,” Wei Xiaobao replied.

Mao Shiba shook his head repeatedly, “Yangzhou and Beijing are thousands of *li* apart, the authorities are posting a reward for my capture, there will be grave danger along the way, how can I take you?”

"I knew it!" Wei Xiaobao said, "I knew you would go back on your own words. By taking me, it would be easier for the authorities to catch you; of course you wouldn't dare."

Mao Shiba angrily shouted, "Why wouldn't I dare?"

"Then take me with you," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"Taking you is very cumbersome," Mao Shiba said, "You haven't even asked your Ma's permission; won't she be worried?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "I often do not go home for several days, Ma has never been worried."

Mao Shiba raised the reins, the horse immediately walked away. "You, little demon, are truly full of tricks."

Wei Xiaobao raised his voice to shout, "You do not dare to take me because you are not Oboi's match, you are afraid I will see it and you will lose face!"

Mao Shiba's anger shot through the roof, he pulled the horse around and roared, "Who says I am not Oboi's match?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "You do not dare to take me must be because you are afraid I would see your disgraceful loss. He will beat you until you are crawling on the ground and cry out, ‘Oboi *Laoye*, have mercy; Oboi *Daren*, please spare lowly Mao Shiba's dog life'. If I hear it, you will want to die of shame!"

Mao Shiba was so angry that he let out some indistinct cries. Jumping down from the horseback he reached out to grab Wei Xiaobao and threw him up the saddle. "I'll take you along, I want to see who is going to cry for mercy!" he angrily said.

Wei Xiaobao was delighted, he said, "If I do not see it with my own eyes, I can only guess that the one crying for mercy will be you, not Oboi."

Mao Shiba raised his left palm and smacked Wei Xiaobao's buttock very hard while shouting, "I will make you cry for mercy first!"

"Aaah!" Wei Xiaobao cried out in pain, but he laughed and

said, "When a dog's paw hit people, it is actually quite heavy."

Mao Shiba roared in laughter, he said, "Little demon, I really cannot win against you."

Wei Xiaobao was unwilling to lose out the least bit, he also said, "Old demon, I also cannot win against you."

Mao Shiba laughed. "I'll take you to Beijing, but along the way you must listen to what I say and not create any trouble."

"Who is making trouble?" Wei Xiaobao retorted, "You went into jail, you left the jail, you killed the salt smugglers, you killed government officers, aren't all those things trouble?"

Mao Shiba said with a laugh, "I said I cannot win against you, I give up." He sat Wei Xiaobao on the saddle and jumped and sat behind him. Pulling another horse along, he look around to get his bearing, then he spurred the horses to gallop toward the north.

Wei Xiaobao had never ridden a horse before, at first he was rather scared. Five or six *li* later, his courage returned, "Can I ride that horse?" he asked.

"If you know how to ride, then go ahead," Mao Shiba said, "But if you don't, you'd better be careful lest you will fall and break your leg."

Wei Xiaobao wanted to win at all cost, he bragged, "I have ridden dozen horses, why do you say I can't ride?" Jumping down from the horse, he walked to the other horse's left side. His right foot stepped on the stirrup, he exerted his strength to pull himself over the horseback. He did not realize that he must step on the stirrup with his left foot. Since he was climbing up using his right foot, he landed with his face facing the horse's buttocks. Mao Shiba roared in laughter and let go of Wei Xiaobao's horse's reins. He lashed his whip and the horse galloped away immediately.

Wei Xiaobao was scared out of his wits; he almost fell down from the horse. With both hands holding on tightly to the horse's tail, his legs clung desperately to the saddle while his body crouched low on the horseback. He heard the wind rushing on his ears and felt his body was slipping down. Luckily he was small and his body was light that by holding tight on the horse's tail, he managed to stay on the horseback. His mouth did not stop shouting and cursing, "My good mama, hot piece mama! Mao Shiba, if you don't stop the horse, *laozi* will f*ck your eighteen stinky ancestors. Aiyo, aiyo, aiyo ..."

The horse was galloping fast on the major road for more than three *li* without slowing down the least bit. Rounding a bend, they came into a fork on the road. There was a mule cart coming slowly from the right, behind the cart was a man of about twenty-seven, twenty-eight riding a white horse. The cart and the horse were also heading north. Since nobody was holding the reins of Wei Xiaobao's horse, it was startled as it ran toward the cart and the horse. The distance between them was getting closer and closer.

"A mad horse!" the cart driver called out, as he hastily trying to steer his cart clear of the road.

The man riding the horse pulled his horse around. In the meantime, Wei Xiaobao had already arrived in front of him. The man reached out and pulled Wei Xiaobao's horse. The horse was running fast, the man's arm strength was quite big, with a powerful tug, the horse stopped immediately. Spurting a burst of white cloud from its nose, the horse was unable to continue galloping forward. From inside the cart came a female voice, asking, "Bai *Dage*, what is it?"

"A runaway horse," the man replied, "There is a child on the horseback, I don't know if he is dead or alive."

Wei Xiaobao turned over and sat up; turning his head around he said, "Of course I am alive, how can I be dead?" He saw the

man had an oval face, his shining eyes were lively; he was wearing a thick dark blue long robe, and a cap adorned with a piece of white jade, obviously this man came from a wealthy family. Wei Xiaobao came from a lowly background, so he detest anybody from a rich family. Spitting a mouthful of spittle on the ground, he said, "Damn it, *laozi* was having fun riding a splendid steed before coming across a corpse blocking the road that *laozi* had to stop, had to stop ..." Before he was able to finish, he bent down on the horse's buttocks and coughed violently.

Because its buttocks were roused, the horse kicked the ground with its left hind leg. "Aiyo!" Wei Xiaobao cried out while slipping down from the horse. "Aiyo hey, aiyo hey!" he screamed.

When he heard Wei Xiaobao's foul mouth earlier, the man was about to get angry, but seeing Wei Xiaobao's pathetic condition as he fell down from the horse, he smiled and turned his horse around to catch up with the mule cart.

Rushing on a horseback, Mao Shiba caught up with him. "Little demon," he called out, "You haven't fallen down and died?"

"I have fallen alright, but I haven't died yet," Wei Xiaobao replied, "*Laozi* was having fun falling down from the horse, but that stinky kid blocked the way; I am mad to death. Aiyo hey ..." groaning and moaning he crawled back up. His kneecaps hurt, he fell back down, kneeling on the ground.

Mao Shiba jumped down in front of him. Pulling him up by the back of his collar he threw Wei Xiaobao on the saddle. After learning a hard lesson, Wei Xiaobao did not dare to say that he wanted to ride by himself anymore.

The two of them rode together for more than thirty *li*. The sun was right above their heads. Finally they saw a small town ahead. Mao Shiba slowly dismounted the horse, then he helped

Wei Xiaobao down in front of an inn. Growing up in a brothel, Wei Xiaobao had always been eating in the kitchen, sitting on the threshold, holding a large blue and white bowl in his hands, filled with rice and a pile of chicken or duck or fish or meat, leftover from the food that the guests had eaten. Although the vegetable and meat dishes were plenty, he had never sat next to anybody else on a table eating the meal properly. This time Mao Shiba was treating him as a friend, an equal. Although their meal only consisted of several bowls of coarse noodles and some scrambled eggs, his heart was very happy.

He had just finished half a bowl of noodles when he heard the clamor of people and horses outside the door, followed by seventeen, eighteen people crowding in. Judging from their appearance they looked like government officials. Wei Xiaobao was inwardly startled; in a low voice he said, "Soldiers! Perhaps they are here to arrest you. Let's run away quickly!"

"Humph," Mao Shiba snorted. Setting down his chopsticks, his hand quietly went toward the hilt of his saber. But those men did not pay him the least bit of attention. They were busy calling the waiter to hurry up and prepare food for them. An inn in a small town like this would not have too many choices of food; there were only pork cooked in soy-sauce, smoked fish, dried marinated tofu, and scrambled eggs. The leader ordered his men to get some ham and chicken they had brought as the side dish.

One man said, "In Yunnan we have always heard that Jiangnan is a good place, where the people wear silk and satin, and eat delicacies of all kinds. I'll say, just from the food, that Jiangnan is not necessarily better than our Kunming."

Another man said, "It's because you, *LaoGe* ['Ol Big Brother'], are used to live comfortably at Ping Xi[27] Wang's Mansion; what you eat and what you drink is entirely different from the

rest of us. It's not that Jiangnan is inferior to Yunnan. You must know that perhaps only a few places on earth are better than Ping Xi Wang’s Mansion." The rest of the men voiced their agreement.

Mao Shiba's countenance changed. "So this bunch of dog's legs[28] is that big traitor to China Wu Sangui's men?" he mused.

A man with a sallow cheek asked, "Huang *Daren*, this time you are going to Beijing, do you think you will be able to see the Emperor?"

A plump man with fair complexion said, "Based on my position alone, I should not be able to see the Emperor, but perhaps by reason of our *Wangye*'s [Lit. 'master king', Prince/Lord/Duke] face, we might see him! The senior officials of the imperial court have always regarded us, the officials of the Xi Xuan [lit. 'western elect'], with special favor."

"That's only natural," another man piped in, "Among the current government officials, next to the Emperor, our *Wangye* has the greatest authority."

"Hey, Xiaobao," Mao Shiba called out loudly, "Do you know who is the most shameless man on earth?"

"Of course I do," Wei Xiaobao replied, "It's the son of turtle bastard!" Actually, he did not know, what he said was the same as not saying anything.

Mao Shiba slapped the table heavily, "That's right!" he said, "Do you know who is the son of turtle bastard?"

"Damn it," Wei Xiaobao said, "That son of turtle bastard is a damn bad thing." While saying that, he also slapped the table as hard as he could.

Mao Shiba said, "Let me tell you, good kid, that the son of turtle bastard is the big traitor to China, who consider the

bandit as his father, who with both hands handed out our great and beautiful rivers and mountains [a common term to refer to one's country, in this case, China], our wonderful world, to the Qing troops ..." As he spoke to this point, those dozen or so government officers had already stared at him, some with angry expression on their faces. Mao Shiba continued, "This big traitor is surnamed Wu; damn it, one turtle is Wu Yigui, two turtles are Wu Ergui, how about three turtles?"

In a loud voice Wei Xiaobao said, "Wu Sangui[29]!"

Mao Shiba laughed aloud and said, "It's exactly Wu Sangui this big ..."

Suddenly a series of ringing sound was heard as seven, eight men unsheathed their weapons and rushed toward Mao Shiba. Wei Xiaobao hastily hid beneath the table. ‘Bing, bing, bang, bang!’ the noise of weapons colliding with each other continuously ringing, Mao Shiba brandished his saber to fight the attackers. Wei Xiaobao saw him still sitting on the long bench, he knew that his leg was still injured and could not walk conveniently, thus he was very anxious inwardly.

A moment later, ‘clang!’ a saber fell to the ground, followed by a man crying a miserable cry as he also fell to the ground. Still, the opponents were too many, Wei Xiaobao saw all around the table feet were constantly moving. Some of these feet were wearing cloth shoes, some were wearing leather boots; obviously the feet belonged to the enemy, since Mao Shiba was wearing straw sandals.

He heard Mao Shiba was fighting and cursing at the same time, “Wu Sangui is a big traitor to China, you are all little traitors to China; if *laozi* do not kill you all … Aiyo!” He cried out loudly; apparently he was injured. Then a man fell face up with blood spurting out of his chest. Wei Xiaobao picked up a saber from the ground and slashed it on a leg wearing cloth shoe. The

saber hacked, the lower half of leg was chopped completely. “Aaah …!” the man screamed and fell backwards.

It was rather dark under the table, plus the men were fighting a tangled battle, nobody knew who had wounded the man, they all thought it was Mao Shiba. Seeing his idea seemed to be working, Wei Xiaobao raised his saber and hacked at another ankle. The man, however, did not fall down; he screamed in pain and loudly called out, “Under the … the table …” While he was stooping down to look, Mao Shiba struck the back of his head with the saber; he fell down and fainted immediately.

Right this moment Wei Xiaobao hacked another man’s calf. The man screamed; he lifted the table with his left hand, the bowls, chopsticks, soups and noodles all flew up. The man immediately chopped his saber down toward Wei Xiaobao’s head. Mao Shiba swept his saber to block. Wei Xiaobao quickly rolled away from the crowd. The man whose calf was cut was extremely furious, with saber upheld high he gave a chase. “Hot piece mama!” Wei Xiaobao cried out, while slipping underneath another table.

“Little demon, come out!” the man bellowed.

“Old demon, you come in!” Wei Xiaobao replied.

The man was livid, he was extending his left hand to lift the table again, suddenly ‘bang!’ a fist punched the pit of his stomach, his body flew out. It was a man who was sitting on that table who hit him. The man who threw the punch immediately took chopsticks from the cylindrical chopstick container, which he threw one by one. Miserable cries of ‘Aiyo! Aiyo!’ were heard incessantly, as the men surrounding them were pierced by the chopsticks; some were pierced on their eyes, some others on their cheeks, but all injuries were on vital places.

One of the man called out, “The bandit is formidable, let’s go!”

Helping their wounded comrades, they scampered out of the door. The sound of hoof beats were heard as the men mounted their horses and left in a hurry.

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and crawled out from beneath the table, his hand was still holding the bloodstained saber. Mao Shiba stood up and walked limply with cupped fist toward the man sitting by the table, he said, “Thank you, Sire, for your help; otherwise Mao Shiba would be heavily outnumbered, and would not be able to deal with today’s matter.”

Wei Xiaobao turned his head around and was slightly startled. Turned out the man sitting on the table was the man he encountered earlier, who pulled the runaway horse he was riding on the road, the man to whom he had thrown several cursing sentences.

The man rose up to return the salute, he said, “Mao *Xiong*’s body still sustains injury, yet you were still moved by righteous indignation, heavily denouncing the traitor to China, generating respect in the hearts of others.”

Mao Shiba said with a laugh, “In all my life the man I hate most is the big traitor Wu Sangui; too bad this evil thief lives in the faraway Yunnan, so I have no way of venting out my anger. Today I can beat his cronies of little traitors, I am very happy. I’d like to consult Sire’s honorable surname and great given name.”

“This is a public place, it’s inconvenient for me to say it out loud,” the man replied, “Mao *Xiong*, let us part now, I am sure we’ll meet again someday.” Finished speaking, he turned around to help a young woman stand up. This woman had been sitting quietly by the table with her head hung low, so her face was not clearly visible.

Mao Shiba angrily said, “Even your name you are not willing to say, aren’t you looking down on others too much?”

The man did not pay him any attention, holding the young woman's hand, they walked toward the door, but as he passed by Mao Shiba, he whispered something on his ear. Mao Shiba's body shook, instantly his face showed a respectful expression. With a bow he said, "Yes, yes, Mao Shiba met a hero today, it's really … it's really the fortune of three lifetimes." Surprisingly the man did not respond, still holding the woman's hand, they walked out the inn's gate, mounted the horse and the carriage, and left.

Seeing Mao Shiba's expression turned from haughty to respectful, Wei Xiaobao was greatly astonished. "Who is that guy?" he asked, "Why are you scared of him?"

"What guy?" Mao Shiba scolded him, "You need to clean your mouth a bit more."

Seeing the inn's boss and waiters look around, the inn was in a complete mess with blood everywhere, Mao Shiba said, "Let's go!" Holding on to the tables for support, he went out the door, picked up the door bolt[30] along the way and used it as a crutch as he made his way out to the horse post to untie the horses. "Mount that one," he said, "Left foot on the stirrup first, then get on the horse … That's it, exactly like that."

"I knew how to ride a horse," Wei Xiaobao said, "It's just that I haven't done it in a very long time, I kind of forget. What's so strange about it?"

Mao Shiba laughed, he leaped onto the other horse, pulling the reins of the horse Wei Xiaobao was riding with his left hand, he led both horses northbound. "I am still injured," he said, "I won't be able to deal with any more Eagle Claws. We must not travel along the major road, we must find a hiding place. After I recuperate we will ride again."

Wei Xiaobao said, "The man we met just now, his martial art skill is superior, one by one the chopstick flew, he struck those

men and made them run. Mao *Dage*, I think you won't be able to beat him."

"That's for sure," Mao Shiba said, "He is a hero of the Mu Palace in Yunnan, how can his skill be not superior?"

"So he is from the Mu Palace in Yunnan?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "I thought he was that Chen *Zongduozhu* of the Tian Di Hui, because I notice how scared you are of him."

Mao Shiba angrily said, "What am I scared of? Little demon speaks nonsense. I respect the Mu Palace, hence I was being 30% polite toward him."

Wei Xiaobao said, "But he was not polite toward you! You asked his honorable surname and great given name, he simply ignored you; he only said, 'let us part now, I am sure we'll meet again someday'."

Mao Shiba said, "Didn't he tell me in the end? Otherwise, how would I know he is from the Mu Palace?"

"What did he whisper in your ear?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Mao Shiba said, "He said, '*Zaixia* is from the Mu Palace of Yunnan, surnamed Bai'."

"Um," Wei Xiaobao said, "Surname Bai? Turns out he is Chi Baishi[31]."

"Little kid must not speak nonsense," Mao Shiba said.

"You saw someone from the Mu Palace and you were scared out your wits, *Laozi* will not keep it in mind," Wei Xiaobao said, "Mao *Dage*, you are not afraid of Oboi, you are not afraid of the big traitor Wu Sangui, yet you are afraid of the Mu Palace; do they have three heads and six arms? Ah, I know! You are afraid he might throw two chopsticks to your eyes, and then Mao Shiba will become the Blind Mao."

"It's not that I am afraid of them," Mao Shiba said, "It's just

that in Jianghu, if a warrior offends the Mu Palace, losing life is nothing, but he will attract the condemnation of tens of thousands people, and will be held in contempt by everybody."

"What kind of place is Mu Palace anyway?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "How can they be that formidable?"

"Damn it," Mao Shiba said, "What kind of question is that? From the start I have never thought it strange." He continued, "For us in Jianghu, to see the people from Mu Palace of Yunnan is really not easy, to befriend them is even more extremely difficult. It just happened that today I was fighting Wu Sangui's cronies. Mu Palace is the sworn enemy of Wu Sangui, naturally they came to my aid. It was you, this little kid, who did not learn well and have resorted to cheap bastard's trick, so that even *laozi* was looked down by others." As he spoke, he could not refrain angry look from appearing on his face.

"Aiyo, tsk, tsk, tsk," Wei Xiaobao clicked his tongue, "Others were putting on an obnoxious air and not willing to become friends with you, how come you are blaming me?"

Mao Shiba angrily said, "You hid underneath the table, chopping people's feet with a saber, damn it, what kind of skill was that? Heroes and warriors always look at each other's eyes, how can they consider you a friend?"

"Your granny," Wei Xiaobao retorted, "If not for *laozi* chopping several feet, I am afraid your life has already gone, yet now you are placing the blame on me."

Mao Shiba thought about how he was despised by the people of Mu Palace of Yunnan; the more he thought, the angrier he became. "I told you not to come with me, but you insist on coming," he said, "You threw lime on people's eyes, this kind of cheap bastard's trick is the most despised by Jianghu people, it is three levels lower than using knock-out drug or burning poisoned incense. I would rather be killed by that Black Dragon

Whip Shi Song than rescued by you using such a mean and shameless trick. Damn it, you, little demon, the more I look at you, the more I am mad."

It was only then did Wei Xiaobao understand that throwing lime on people's eyes was a mean and lowly matter in Jianghu; without realizing it, he had violated Wulin's biggest taboo. But hiding under the table and chopping people's feet was obviously not something to be proud of either. However, being scolded, from shame he became angry. "Killing people with a saber is murder, killing people with lime is still murder, what 'respectable' or 'lowly'?" he hatefully said, "If it were not for me, the little demon, using a ‘lowly’ trick to save you, you, the old demon, would have become ‘respectable’ ghost early on. Is not your thigh injured? People chopped your thigh using saber, I chopped other people's feet using saber. Both thigh and feet are lower body parts, what's the difference? You are not willing to take me to Beijing, just go your way, let me go mine. From now on, let's just say that we do not know each other."

Seeing how Wei Xiaobao was covered in dust and bloodstain, Mao Shiba recalled that the child was injured all because of him. That place was far away from Yangzhou, he definitely could not abandon the child in the wilderness, much less this child had saved his life twice, how could he forget favor and violate justice? Thereupon he said, "Alright, I will take you to Beijing, but you must agree to my three conditions."

Wei Xiaobao was very happy, he said, "Agree to your three conditions, what's so difficult about that? A real man speak the words, some horses cannot chase it!" He had heard the storyteller mention 'team of four horses cannot chase it', but for some reason he always forget the 'four horses' part.

Mao Shiba said, "First condition, you must not create trouble, must not curse people with filthy words, you must clean up your mouth a bit."

"That's easy," Wei Xiaobao replied, "You don’t want me to curse, then I won’t curse. But what if someone is provoking me?"

"If you are being good, why would anybody want to provoke you?" Mao Shiba said, "Second condition, when you are fighting, you must not bite people, you must not throw lime in their eyes, or rolling around on the ground, or hiding underneath a table and chopping people's feet, or crawling underneath someone's crotch and grab their scrotum, or screaming and crying when you are beaten, or lying down pretending to be dead; you must not do any of those dirty tricks. Those are all despicable things, not things that heroes and warriors would do."

"If I am not somebody's match, must I just take the beating without hitting back?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Mao Shiba said, "If you want to hit back, you must use real skill, don't use your hoodlum or gangster method; don't let others laugh at you until their mouth crooked. You have lived in a brothel, that was all right, but you are roaming the Jianghu with me, you must not resort to those kinds of tricks."

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "Easy for you to say to fight with real skill. I am just a little kid, what 'real skill' do I have? Must not do this, must not do that, won't that be the same as taking the beating without hitting back?"

Mao Shiba continued, "Martial art must be learned; who can do martial art as soon as he is out of his mother's belly? You are still very young, there is still time if you start training now. You can kowtow and take me as your *Shifu*, I will take you as my disciple. All my life I have been wandering around in Jianghu, I never had several days of peace and quiet to take any disciple; so consider it your good fortune. As long as you are obedient, study diligently and practice hard, in the future you may not necessarily unable to become a martial art master." As he

spoke, there was a hint of hope in his gaze toward Wei Xiaobao.

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, "No, can't do. You and I are friends of the same standings; if I take you as my *Shifu*, won't I be a generation lower than you? Your granny, you harbor malicious intentions, you want to take advantage of me."

Mao Shiba was furious; countless people in Jianghu had wanted to take him as their master, wanted to learn his saber technique 'Five Tigers Breaking the Gates', which was famous throughout the Jianghu. It was just that if not the candidate's heart was not in the right place, then his aptitude was not good, or perhaps it was not the opportune time; he did not have the time to leisurely passing on his skill to his disciple. Today, remembering how Wei Xiaobao had saved his life, he wanted to teach him martial art; who would have thought that Wei Xiaobao would flatly refuse? In his anger, he wanted to strike him with his palm. His hand was raised, but in the end he held his hand; he said, "Let me tell you: right now, on an impulse I am willing to take you as my disciple. If later on you kowtow to me a hundred times and ask, I will not take you."

"What's so strange about that?" Wei Xiaobao said, "If later on you kowtow to me three hundred times and entreat me to take you as my master, I will still be unwilling. If I be your disciple, I will have to obey you in everything, where's the fun in that? I don't want to learn your martial art."

Mao Shiba angrily said, "Fine, you don't want to learn then don't learn. If in the future someone catch you, making you neither dead nor alive, don't regret it."

"What's to regret?" Wei Xiaobao said, "Let's just say I learn your martial art skill, what's so good about it? You were tied down by the Black Dragon Whip without being able to move at all; seeing that eating-without-paying fellow from the Mu family of Yunnan you bowed down respectfully to flatter him, to

become friends with him, while he plainly ignored you. Although my martial skill is inferior to you, but ..."

The more Mao Shiba listened, the angrier he got. Finally he could not endure patiently and 'smack!' he slapped Wei Xiaobao's mouth heavily. Wei Xiaobao had anticipated this, surprisingly he did not cry but burst into loud laughter instead, he said, "I was right on target, wasn't I? That's why you are angry. Let me ask you: you wanted to befriend others, but others ignored you, and thus you vent your anger on *Laozi*?"

Mao Shiba was exasperated by this child; beating him had failed, scolding him had also failed, ignoring him did not do anything either. His natural temperament was fiery, but now he was forced to exercise patience. "Humph," he snorted, as he puffed his cheeks and blew a mouthful of air. Releasing the reins, he called out, "Horsey, oh, horsey, quickly do a tiger leap, let this little demon fall down and half dead." At first he wanted Wei Xiaobao to agree to his three conditions, but since the second condition had already fallen apart, he did not want to think about the third condition.

Wei Xiaobao pulled the reins by himself and managed to make the horse trotting nicely, it did not give him any difficulty at all. Wei Xiaobao was inwardly very happy, he mused, "You don't teach me horse riding, can't *Laozi* learn it by myself?" He also thought, "When I follow you roaming the Jianghu in the future, I will watch how you are going to fight with other people. You do not teach me, don't tell me that I don't have eyeballs that I cannot look. Not only will I learn your martial art skill, I will also learn your opponents' skill at the same time. The skills of several people combined, naturally I will be stronger than you. Pei," he spat, "Damn it, what's so special about your skill? That eating-without-paying fellow's skill in throwing chopsticks is very effective. If he wanted *Laozi* to kowtow and learn his school's skill, *Laozi* will have no problem in agreeing. Damn it,

why would he want me to kowtow and learn his school's skill?" Thinking to this point, he could not help but scoffing and then burst into laughter.

Mao Shiba turned his head, "What's so funny?" he asked.

"I was thinking about that eating-without-paying fellow from the Mu Palace ..." Wei Xiaobao replied.

"What eating-without-paying fellow?" Mao Shiba asked.

"Isn't his surname Bai?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Surname Bai is surname Bai," Mao Shiba said, "How does surname Bai turn into eating-without-paying? In the Mu Palace of Yunnan, their Bai family is highly regarded. Liu, Bai, Fang and Su were four great generals of the Mu Palace of Yunnan."

"What three great generals, four great generals?" Wei Xiaobao asked again, "What kind of ghost place is Mu Palace of Yunnan anyway?"

"Can't you clean up your mouth a little bit?" Mao Shiba said, "In Jianghu, whenever the name Mu Palace is mentioned, nobody does not filled with admiration; what do you mean 'ghost place'?"

"Uh", Wei Xiaobao mumbled.

Mao Shiba continued, "When Ming Taizu [First Ming Emperor, the founder of Ming Dynasty] raised arms against the Yuan [Dynasty, the Mongols], Mu *Wangye*, Mu Ying has rendered a great merit by subduing Yunnan. Taizu bestowed Yunnan to his family forever. After his death, the title Guo Gong [State Duke] was granted to his offsprings from generation to generation."

Wei Xiaobao slapped his saddle and exclaimed, "Turns out it was *that* Mu Palace, the home of Mu Ying, Mu *Wangye*. You only said Mu Palace of Yunnan, you did not say it clearly. If you had said Mu Ying, Mu *Wangye*, how can I not know? Mu *Wangye* has been dead for several thousand years, you don't have to be

that afraid."

"What several thousand years?" Mao Shiba said, "Rubbish! We, the warriors of Jianghu, have a deep respect of Mu Palace, not only because of Mu Ying, Mu *Wangye*, but because of his descendant, Mu Tianbo. When the last Ming emperor, King Gui ran away to Yunnan, the Duke of Qian [i.e. Guizhou Province], Mu Tianbo, that's right, I remember now, the Duke of Qian was loyal and devoted, he escorted the Emperor and protected his master. When that traitor Wu Sangui attacked Yunnan, Duke of Qian protected King Gui escaping to Burma. The bad people of Burma wanted to kill King Gui, Mu Tianbo died in place of his master. This kind of loyalty is indeed rare among the heroes and warriors, from ancient age to today."

"Ah," Wei Xiaobao exclaimed, "So this Mu Tianbo, Master Mu was a descendant of the Legend of Heroic Deeds' Mu Ying. Mu *Wangye* was brave and unstoppable, he was the Taizu Emperor's trusted lieutenant, this much I know, you don't have to tell me." He had heard the Legend of Heroic Deeds told by the storyteller, about Xu Da, Chang Yuchun, Hu Dahai, Mu Ying, and other great generals; in fact, he was very familiar with their stories. "Why didn't you say so earlier?" he asked, "If I knew the Mu Palace is Mu *Wangye*'s family, I would be 30% more polite toward that eating-without-paying fellow. What kind of people are Liu, Bai, Fang and Su, the four great generals?"

"Liu, Bai, Fang and Su, four families have always been commanders under the Mu Palace," Mao Shiba replied, "Their ancestors helped Mu *Wangye* to subdue Yunnan. When Tianbo *Gong* [lit. honorable gentleman] was escorting the Emperor to Burma, the descendants of these four great generals were also fighting to their deaths, only their younger sons and disciples managed to escape with their lives. It was because I remember that that surnamed Bai gentleman was such a hero that I was being polite to him. Besides, in one hand, he had helped me

repelling the Eagle Claws working for that great traitor ..."

"I was also helping you repelling the Eagle Claws working for that great traitor," Wei Xiaobao cut him off, "Why aren't you polite to me?"

Mao Shiba stared at him, and continued, "On the other hand, he is still very much a loyal subject, all Jianghu people highly esteem him. If we offend the Mu family of Yunnan, wouldn't we be reviled by all the people under the heavens?"

"So that's how it is," Wei Xiaobao said, "Seeing a loyal subject, naturally we must show a bit of respect."

"Since I've known you, this is the first time you are speaking reasonably," Mao Shiba said.

"I don't know how long do I have to wait until I can hear some reasonable words from you," Wei Xiaobao said, "Mu *Wangye* blew the copper horn and crossing the river, shooting the elephants with rocket, that kind of great hero, who does not respect deeply? Surely I don't have to wait for you to fart?"

"What blowing the copper horn and crossing the river, shooting the elephants with rocket?" Mao Shiba asked.

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and said, "You only know how to bootlick Mu Palace of Yunnan, yet you don't know how great of a hero Mu *Wangye* was. Do you know what position Mu *Wangye* held under the Taizu Emperor?"

"Mu *Wangye* was a great general under the Taizu Emperor, who does not know?" Mao Shiba replied.

"Pei!" Wei Xiaobao spat, "Great general? Of course he was a great general, would he be a nameless soldier? Um, under the Taizu Emperor there were six kings; I am sure you have heard about Xu Da, Xu *Wangye*, and Chang Yuchun, Chang *Wangye*, do you know who were the other four kings?"

Mao Shiba was a hero of the wilderness, he knew nothing

about the history of the founding of the Ming Dynasty. Of course he had heard the names Xu Da and Chang Yuchun, but he did not know that they were kings, and neither did he know there were four other kings. Wei Xiaobao, on the other hand, heard the story of the Legend of Heroic Deeds in Yangzhou teahouses so many times that he knew it inside-out. The fall of the Ming Dynasty happened not too long ago, the hearts of the people were still attached to the old way, but nobody dared to openly discuss anti-Qing, restoring-Ming sentiment. The storytellers in the teahouses only talked about the old stories of the Ming Dynasty. The stories the listeners liked most were about the founding of the Ming Dynasty and the defeat of the Tatars, which were recorded in the 'Legend of Heroic Deeds'.

During the founding of the country, the most arduous battle Ming Taizu faced was the great Lake Poyang battle against Chen Youliang, but the one the listeners most interested to hear was how the Mongolian army was driven away beyond the Great Wall, how the enemy was completely routed on the desert and they fled. In the listeners' ears, it was the story of Ming Taizu defeating the Mongolian army; in their hearts, however, it changed into the Qing army. The great victory of Han people, the crushing defeat of the enemy; the listeners' spirits were swelling with pride. Therefore, among the various ministers who had given outstanding service during the founding of the Ming Dynasty, Xu Da, Chang Yuchun and Mu Ying, were the three names the listeners adored most. When the storytellers narrated how these three people kill the enemy, they were always adding 'oil and vinegar', with much flourish, so that the audience was radiant with delight as if they were drunk and stupefied.

Seeing Mao Shiba was unable to answer, Wei Xiaobao smugly said, "The four kings were Li Wenzhong, Deng Yu, Tang He, and of course Mu Ying, Mu *Wangye*. On how these four *Wangye* were granted the title King, I supposed I should tell you, since I

am sure you did not know it, am I right?" Actually, neither did he remember how these six kings get their titles. Mao Shiba nodded.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Tang He was Ming Taizu's old friend, he was older than Taizu. Deng Yu had also known Taizu for a very long time, they had always been fighting together for the country. Li Wenzhong was Taizu's nephew[32]. Mu *Wangye* was Taizu's foster son, so his surname was originally Zhu, he was called Zhu Ying. Afterwards he rendered a great service, Taizu granted him a two-character surname, thereupon he was called Mu Ying."

"So that's the story," Mao Shiba said, "What about blowing the copper horn and shooting the elephants? What's the story?"

"It was 'blowing the copper horn and crossing the river, shooting the elephants with rocket', not 'blowing the copper horn and shooting the elephants'," Wei Xiaobao said, "Taizu subdued the land under the heavens, until only Yunnan left. The King Liang of Guizhou had not surrendered. That King Liang whatsisname was the Mongol's last emperor's nephew, he defended Yunnan and Guizhou, and was not willing to surrender." The King Liang's original name was Basalawarmi (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basalawarmi); Wei Xiaobao could not remember his name, so he said whatever comes into his head.

Although Mao Shiba felt strange, he did not dare to argue, he simply listened as Wei Xiaobao continued, "Taizu Emperor's dragon heart was enraged, he dispatched three-hundred thousand cavalry under the leadership of Mu *Wangye* to launch an attack. When they arrived at Yunnan border, they met the Yuan army. Yuan army's marshal was called Delmek, who was ten *zhang* tall, whose head was like a round-bottomed wicker basket ..."

"How can there be any ten *zhang* tall man?" Mao Shiba protested.

Wei Xiaobao knew he had a slip of tongue, but he argued, “Mongolians are bigger and taller than we, Han people, that Delmek’s entire body was covered in iron armor, his hand carried a long spear, he was shouting mumbo-jumbo loudly by the river bank, as if there were three thunderclaps in the air. Suddenly there were continuous ‘splash, splash’ noises from everywhere, do you know what happened?”

“I don’t know, what happened?” Mao Shiba asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Turned out Delmek’s ‘Wah! Wah!’ shout had reached the other side of the river, scaring a dozen or so Ming soldiers out of their wits that they fell down from their horses and into the river. Mu *Wangye* knew something was terribly wrong, he thought that if Delmek cried out several more times, my troops will fall into the river one by one, then our mission will fail. Thereupon he knitted his brows and thought hard of an idea.”

When he spoke, usually Wei Xiaobao’s mouth would constantly spit out vulgar language; the words ‘damn it’ had never left his mouth. However, talking about Mu Ying subduing Yunnan, he adapted the storyteller’s tone, surprisingly, not a single vulgar word escaped his mouth; occasionally, he would even quote or misquote Chinese adages.

He continued his story, “As soon as Mu *Wangye* saw Delmek was about to open his ferocious mouth, he strung his bow and shot an arrow. ‘Whoosh!’ the arrow went straight toward Delmek’s mouth. Mu *Wangye*’s shooting skill has reached the ‘penetrating the poplar tree in a hundred steps, penetrating the mouth in a thousand steps’ level. Splitting the air, the arrow flew across the surface of the river toward Delmek’s big mouth. Delmek was also a hero and a warrior, seeing how powerful and fearsome the incoming arrow was, he hastily lowered his head

and dodged it. The troops behind him cried out together, 'Not good!' Delmek turned around and saw that ten generals had the pit of their stoimachs pierced by the arrow, blood spurt out violently. Turned out Mu *Wangye*'s arrow successively bored through ten generals, from the first general's pit of the stomach and went out from his back, then it went to the second general's pit of the stomach, and so on. Altogether it passed through ten men."

Shaking his head, Mao Shiba said, "How can there be such thing? Even if Mu *Wangye* had a supernatural power, it's impossible for one arrow to pierce through ten men."

"Mu *Wangye* was the celestial constellation descending into the world of the immortals," Wei Xiaobao said, "He was sent by the Jade Emperor to protect Taizu Emperor; how could be the same as an ordinary person? Did you say you are Mao Shiba? This arrow has penetrated ten, and it even has a special name, it's called 'Cloud Penetrating Arrow'."

Mao Shiba was incredulous, "And then, what happened?" he asked.

"Delmek was furious," Wei Xiaobao said, "He thought, 'you can shoot arrow, do you think I can't?' Thereupon he raised his bow and also shot an arrow to Mu *Wangye*. Mu *Wangye* called out, 'Bring it on!' Stretching out the two fingers of his left hand, he lightly caught the arrow. Right that moment, a flock of wild geese flew overhead, their cry filled the sky. Mu *Wangye* had an idea, he called out, 'I am going to shoot the left eye of the third wild goose!' 'Swish!' he shot an arrow. Delmek mused, 'It's not easy just to shoot the third goose, how can you distinguish the left eye from the right eye?' So he looked up. Right this moment, Mu *Wangye* repeatedly shot, three arrows were sent flying toward Delmek."

"Wonderful!" Mao Shiba exclaimed, "It's called 'making a sound in the east and strike to the west' tactic!"

“It seemed like Delmek was not fated to die yet,” Wei Xiaobao said, “The first arrow struck his left eye, he fell back with his face up. The second arrow and the third arrow successively killed eight of his generals. Yuan soldiers were hairy, so the Ming soldiers called them ‘hairy soldiers, hairy generals’. Mu *Wangye* released three arrows, and killed eighteen hairy generals. It was called ‘Mu *Wangye* fought the Great War across the river, three arrows shot dead eighteen hairy men’[33]!”

Mao Shiba was startled, “What?!?” he asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Mu *Wangye* shot arrows across the river and killed Mao Shiba!” Speaking to this point, he could not help breaking up in giggles.

It was only then that Mao Shiba understood that Wei Xiaobao was actually cursing him in a roundabout way. “Damn it!” he swore, “Rubbish! Mu *Wangye* fought the Great War across the river, three arrows shot dead Wei Xiaobao!”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “At that time I was not even born yet, how could Mu *Wangye* shoot me to death?”

“Stop making irresponsible remarks,” Mao Shiba said, “Delmek was hit on his left eye, and then what?”

“Seeing their marshal was hit by the arrow and fell down from his horse, the Yuan army was immediately thrown into chaos,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Mu *Wangye* was about to give his troops an order to cross the river, when suddenly he heard loud cry from the other side of the river, the Yuan army’s reinforcement had arrived. From the opposite bank, the enemy shot arrows randomly, darkening the sky. Mu *Wangye* had another idea, he dispatched four great generals under him to quietly lead the troops crossing the river downstream. When they were behind the Yuan troop’s formation, they blew the copper horns.”

“Those four generals must be Liu, Bai, Fang and Su, weren’t

they?” Mao Shiba asked.

Wei Xiaobao did not know any better, but he was not willing Mao Shiba to outguess him, thereupon he said, “No, those four generals were Zhao, Qian, Sun and Li. Liu, Bai, Fang and Su stayed behind by Mu *Wangye*’s side.”

Mao Shiba nodded. “So that’s how it is,” he said.

“Mu *Wangye* passed on his order,” Wei Xiaobao continued, “He instructed Liu, Bai, Fang and Su to have the troops under their command to shout together while lowering small boats and wooden rafts into the river, dispatching a thousand Ming soldiers to pretend they were about to cross the river. Seeing the Ming troops were coming their way, the Yuan soldiers desperately released more arrows. Immediately Mu *Wangye* withdrew the troops, but less than an hour later, he dispatched the troops again, pretending they were about to cross the river. Again the Yuan soldiers released more arrows. Nobody knows how many fish, turtles, shrimps and crabs died in the river that day.”

“I don’t believe you,” Mao Shiba said, “Shooting dead some fish, that is still possible; but shrimps are extremely slender, crabs and turtles have hard shells protecting their bodies, how can they shoot them dead?”

“If you don’t believe me,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Why don’t you buy a turtle in the small town ahead, also buy a crab and a shrimp. String them together and hang them, then shoot an arrow through them. See if you can shoot them dead or not.”

Mao Shiba thought, "We are in a hurry for an urgent matter, how can there be any time to do this troublesome matter?" He was enthralled by the story, however, and was afraid Wei Xiaobao would sulk and did not continue; thereupon he said, "Alright, if you say they were shot to death then they were shot to death. What happened next?"

"Afterwards," Wei Xiaobao continued, "The troops under Mu *Wangye*'s command picked up eighteen animals shot dead by the arrows, some were hairy turtles, so they cooked and ate them, and that's the end of the story."

"Little demon," Mao Shiba cursed, "You are still cursing me in a roundabout way. Tell me, how did Mu *Wangye* cross the river?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Seeing the Yuan soldiers release the arrow, Mu *Wangye* ordered his men to beat the drums and shout, as if they were going to cross the river, but actually they were not going to cross the river. They heard the loud blaring noise of the copper horns from behind the Yuan army, so they knew Zhao, Qian, Sun and Li, four generals succeeded in crossing the river downstream and circled behind the Yuan army. Only then did Mu *Wangye* give the order to cross the river. The soldiers held up their shields in the front while pushing the boats and the rafts to cross the river and attack. The Yuan soldiers had been shooting arrows for half a day, by this time their arrow supply was almost depleted. Hearing the enemy's attack from behind while their commander was seriously injured, their hearts were thrown into chaos. Mu *Wangye* was the first to charge on his horseback. The Yuan soldiers fled to the east and ran to the west in great confusion. Mu *Wangye* saw a general lying down on a horseback among the Yuan army, with a lot of Yuan soldiers all around protecting him, so he knew it must be Delmek. Immediately he spurred his horse to pursue, while with a stern voice he shouted, 'Delmek, you haven't get down from the horse and surrender?' Delmek said, 'I ... I am not Delmek, I am Mao ...' Mu *Wangye* saw a feathered arrow sticking out from his left eye, with a gold character near the arrowhead, it was precisely the character 'Mu'. Whose arrow was that if it was not his own? Mu *Wangye* did not hesitate anymore, reaching out he grabbed and brought the man down, while shouting, 'Tie him up!'. And so Liu, Bai, Fang and Su, four generals, who had been

following him, grabbed Delmek and tied him up solidly. The Yuan army suffered a crushing defeat, with countless soldiers drowned to death in the river. The turtles in the river ate quite a bit of hairy bodies that day, and grew hair on their bodies. This kind of turtles are called Hairy (Mao) Turtles, which are not found anywhere else."

Mao Shiba had a feeling that Wei Xiaobao was cursing him again. "Humph," he snorted, but did not dare to argue, for all he knew, there might be real hairy turtles in Yunnan's rivers.

Wei Xiaobao said, "As he seized a total victory that day, Mu *Wangye* advanced his troops onto King Liang's capital immediately. When they reached the outskirt of the city, he saw the city was deathly still. Mu *Wangye* gave his order to beat the drum to provoke a battle, but then he saw a wooden tablet hanging on the top of the city wall, with two character 'cease fighting' written on it."

"It must be that the King Liang knew they were no match for the enemy and thus hung the 'cease fighting' tablet," Mao Shiba commented.

"Mu *Wangye* was benevolent and broadminded," Wei Xiaobao continued, "He thought that since the King Liang was hanging the 'cease fighting' tablet, most likely they were about to surrender. If I proceed by attacking, after the wall is down, there will be many casualties among the common people; I'd rather give them three days to surrender, so as to avoid killing innocent people."

Mao Shiba slapped his thigh and exclaimed loudly, "That's right! Mu *Wangye*'s family has been the guardians of Yunnan, they exist and perish together with the Ming Dynasty. It must be because Mu *Wangye* cherished common people, he was kindhearted, that's why the Heaven blessed him."

Wei Xiaobao said, "That night Mu *Wangye* was sitting in the

army camp, reading the Spring and Autumn Annals by the lantern light."

"It was Guan *Wangye* who sat by the light reading the Spring and Autumn Annals," Mao Shiba said, "Could it be that Mu *Wangye* also read the Spring and Autumn Annals?"

"They were both *Wangye*," Wei Xiaobao said, "Of course they both read the Spring and Autumn Annals. If they did not read the Spring and Autumn Annals, are you saying that they should read the Summer and Winter Annals? It was Zhang Fei[34] who read the Summer and Winter Annals. The impertinent Zhang Fei was brave but not shrewd; Mu *Wangye* was the celestial constellation descending into the world of the immortals, just like Guan *Wangye*, naturally they read the Spring and Autumn Annals and not the Summer and Winter Annals." Not knowing anything about the Spring and Autumn Annals or Summer and Winter Annals, Mao Shiba could only nod his head in agreement.

"Mu *Wangye* read for a while," Wei Xiaobao continued, "All of a sudden he needed to pee, he stood up, took the golden chamber pot bestowed to him by the Taizu Emperor, and was about to pee when suddenly he heard several loud cries coming from inside the city wall. It was very loud, it did not sound like tiger's roar, and did not sound like horse's neigh either. When Mu *Wangye* heard it, he knew something was amiss ..."

"What cry was that?" Mao Shiba asked.

"Why don't you try to guess?" Wei Xiaobao said.

"Seems to me like several Yuan generals were roaring in the city, just like Delmek earlier," Mao Shiba guessed.

"No," Wei Xiaobao shook his head, "As soon as Mu *Wangye* heard it, he changed his mind and did not pee. Respectfully he put the chamber pot back on the table ..."

"Why did he put a chamber pot on the table?" Mao Shiba cut him off.

"It was a golden chamber pot bestowed by the Taizu Emperor; do you think it was an ordinary chamber pot?" Wei Xiaobao argued, "That's why when Mu *Wangye* put it down, he must be respectful. After laying down the pot, he beat the drum to summon the generals into his command tent. Picking up a golden arrow as a symbol of his authority, he said, 'General Liu, receive this order: Take three thousands soldiers to catch field mice this very night; reward will be given to those who catch many, martial law will apply to those who catch a few.' General Liu replied, 'Command received!' Taking the golden arrow, he left to catch field mice."

"Why did he want field mice?" Mao Shiba wondered aloud.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Mu *Wangye* led his troops like a deity, how could he divulge secret military tactic? The marshals received the order, they followed it to the letter. If the officer receiving the order asked too much, Mu *Wangye* might be enraged and would send the officer outside the tent to be beheaded. If you were one of Mu *Wangye*'s generals and you keep asking questions like this, even if you have eighteen melon heads, damn it, all eighteen will be chopped by Mu *Wangye*."

"If I were one of the generals, naturally I won't ask anything," Mao Shiba said, "But you are not Mu *Wangye*, why can't I ask you questions?"

Wei Xiaobao shook his head, "No question, no question!" he said, "Mu *Wangye* picked up the second golden arrow and gave it to General Bai, saying, 'I order you to lead twenty thousand men to dig a trench within five *li* of this place. The trench must be two *li* long, two *zhang* wide, and three *zhang* deep. You must finish the trench this very night without any mistake.' General Bai received the order and left. Mu *Wangye* then gave his order to retreat, to break the camp and pitch the camp again six *li*

from the city walls."

The more Mao Shiba listened, the more baffled he was. "That's really strange," he said, "I cannot guess anything at all."

"Humph," Wei Xiaobao snorted, "If you could guess Mu *Wangye*'s military tactics, Mu *Wangye* would become Mao Shiba, Mao Shiba would become Mu *Wangye*. At daybreak the next day, the two generals Liu and Bai returned: They caught more than ten thousands field mice, and the trench was dug. Mu *Wangye* nodded his head and said, 'Very well, send a scout to the city to spy the enemy movements. About *wupai* hour [seventh hour, between 11am - 1 pm] suddenly they heard thundering drums from the city, followed by loud battle cry. The scout returned, galloping the horse like flying, and reported: 'Reporting to the Marshal, the situation is not good!' Slapping the table, Mu *Wangye* sternly said, 'Damn it, what matter makes you panic?' The scout said, 'Reporting to the Marshal, the Yuan army opened wide the northern gate, and out of the city came several hundred long-nosed cow demons, running toward our camp to attack!' Mu *Wangye* roared in laughter and said, 'What long-nosed cow demons? Gather more info!' The scout received the order and left."

"What kind of animal is a long-nosed cow demon?" Mao Shiba wondered.

With a straight face Wei Xiaobao said, "I knew you would not know it either. This animal is bigger than a cow, its hide is rough, its muscle thick, its nose is long, with two tusks protruding forward, its pair of large ears look like curtain, its appearance is incomparably fierce; don't you think it looks like a long-nosed cow demon?"

"Um," Mao Shiba grunted, and nodded his head, apparently he was trying to picture the long-nosed cow demon in his mind.

Wei Xiaobao continued, "Mu *Wangye* thought aloud, 'This scout is really muddleheaded, he sees little and marvels at a lot of things; seeing a camel he says it's a horse with a swelling back, seeing an elephant he says it's a long-nosed cow demon!'"

Mao Shiba was startled; and then he burst out in laughter. "That scout was indeed muddleheaded," he said, "Unexpectedly he regarded elephants as long-nosed cow demons. But he was a northerner, had never seen an elephant, so you can't really blame him."

Whenever the storyteller in Yangzhou was telling this 'long-nosed cow demon' story, the teahouse audience always broke out in laughter. This time Wei Xiaobao imitated the way the story was delivered, and sure enough, Mao Shiba also broke out in laughter.

Wei Xiaobao continued, "Mu *Wangye* arranged his troops in battle formation; looking to the distance, he saw dust was rising high, those several hundred elephants, with daggers tied onto their heads, were rushing wildly toward them, the elephants' tails were ablaze. Yunnan is very close to Burma; King Liang had purchased several hundred elephants from Burma, and trained the elephants to be a fiery formation, by tying pine branches onto the elephants' tails and lighted it with fire. The elephants were scared and thus they charged toward the Ming army. Elephants' skin is firm and their muscle thick; crossbow arrows cannot harm them. As soon as the Ming army was thrown into confusion, the Yuan army would follow behind the elephants and make a surprise attack. The Ming troops were northerners, they have never seen elephants; as soon as they saw the elephants, they cried out inwardly, 'King of cow demon's tail can shoot flames, today's matter can't be good!'"

Mao Shiba's expression was grim, with subdued tone he said, "Those flaming elephants were formidable for sure."

"Mu *Wangye* remained calm and collected, he simply laughed coldly," Wei Xiaobao, "When the elephants were about ten *zhang* away, he suddenly barked, 'Release the field mice!' Those more than ten thousand field mice were released, instantly the ground was covered with mice running around randomly. You must know that elephants do not fear lions, bears, tigers or leopards, but they are most afraid of mice. If a mouse get into an elephant's ear, it can eat the elephant's brain without the elephant able to do anything. As soon as the elephants saw the mice, they were so frightened as if their spirits had flown up to the sky. They turned around and fled, charging into the Yuan army formation, trampling the Yuan generals and soldiers' head and legs. Some elephants could not tell east from west and ran toward the Ming army, but one by one they all fell into the trench. Mu *Wangye* called out, 'Release the rocket [orig. `fire arrow’]!' As soon as he, the Senior [orig. 'laorenjia' - a polite term to address older (or more respectful) people] gave his order, the sky was filled with thousands, tens of thousands sparks. It was a wonderful sight."

"How can the arrows catch fire?" Mao Shiba asked.

"You think those rockets [`fire arrow’] were arrows on fire?" Wei Xiaobao said, "Wrong! Those rockets were firecrackers and cannons. The Ming army was equipped with cannons, saltpeter and sulfur gunpowder. The previous night Mu *Wangye* had issued an order to the sergeants to load the cannons with gunpowder and firecrackers. When the cannons were fired, sparks filled the sky with loud 'Bang! Bang! Boom! Boom! noise. Those elephants were even more scared and ran away desperately, trampling the Yuan army into pulp; scattered, collapsed and out of their minds. Mu *Wangye* gave the order to beat the drums to signal an attack. His troops responded by loud battle cry as they followed the elephants breaking into the city. King Liang, taking along his concubine, was drinking wine at the top of city wall, waiting for the news of the Ming army's

defeat. Seeing several hundred elephants bursting into the city, King Liang cried out, "Guluabutu, wuliwu! Guluabutu, wuliwu!"

Mao Shiba was puzzled, "What did he call wuyewu for?" he asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "He is a Mongolian, naturally he cried out in Mongolian. He said, 'Aiyo, not good! The elephants are revolting!' Rushing down the wall, he saw a well and immediately jumped in, wishing to kill himself. Unexpectedly, because King Liang was extremely fat, his belly was enormous; as he jumped halfway down, his belly stuck on mouth of the well, he could neither go up nor down. He cried out, 'Oh, this is bad! The king is hanging in the air!'"

"How come this time he did not speak Mongolian?" Mao Shiba asked.

"He was crying out in Mongolian," Wei Xiaobao said, "But I know you wouldn't understand, so I changed it into our language. Riding on his horse, Mu *Wangye* was the first to break into the city. Seeing an old Tatar wearing yellow gown and golden crown on his head, he knew it was King Liang. Seeing the king's big belly stuck in the mouth of the well, he could not help but bursting into loud laughter. Grabbing the king's hair, he lifted him up, but he smelled a stench to the high heaven, it was because King Liang was extremely scared that he pooped and peed in his pants!"

Mao Shiba roared in laughter and said, "Xiaobao, the way you tell the story is very good. Turns out Mu *Wangye* subdued Yunnan with both bravery and wisdom. If he did not release the mouse formation, King Liang's fiery elephant formation would crush the Ming army to utter defeat."

"That goes without saying," Wei Xiaobao said, "Mu *Wangye* fought a war with mice, we fought with lime, there is not much difference between us."

“Wrong!” Mao Shiba shook his head, “As the saying goes, ‘all’s fair in war’, fighting a war with anything is permissible. Didn’t Zhuge Liang[35] use the empty city strategy? But we use saber and spear, wandering the Jianghu with straightforward and upright attitude; fighting a war and fighting one-on-one are completely different.”

“I’ll say they are more or less the same,” Wei Xiaobao said.

The two of them talking and chatting along the way, so the journey did not feel so lonely. Mao Shiba explained all kinds of customs, virtues, and taboos of the Jianghu; finally he said, “You do not know martial art, people also know that you are not from any school or societal family, they won’t deal with you with heavy hands; you must never pretend to be what you are not, otherwise you will suffer worse fate.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “I, the Little White Dragon Wei Xiaobao, am an expert in water skill, I can stay underwater, living on fish and shrimp. But my land based skill is nothing to be talk about.” Mao Shiba roared in laughter.

That evening the two of them sought lodging in a peasant family home. Mao Shiba took out several *taels* of silver and gave them to the peasant family, so that they could stay for a dozen more days to recuperate. When most of injury was healed, they hired a large cart to continue their journey.

Book Note: ‘Best friendship at first meeting’ means ‘familiarity at first sight’, not at all talking about friendship at first meeting is the best, and then later on it gradually becomes not good.

Chapter 3

Talisman tucked inside the sleeve encircles and divides the room, unexpected success of an auger out of the sack.

(Translated by Foxs)

A man pounced, Mao Shiba responded by a flying kick, hitting the man's lower abdomen, and sent him flying backward. The other five men cursed, and pounced together. Mao Shiba unleashed his qin na skill,

his elbow struck his palm hacked, in a short time he managed to knock down four men.

One day they reached Beijing, by the time they entered the city, it was already afternoon. Mao Shiba warned Wei Xiaobao to be careful in everything he say or do, it was the capital, government's eyes and ears were numerous, they should not expose any mistake. "What mistake?" Wei Xiaobao said, "You are the one who should not expose any mistake. Aren't you here to challenge Oboi to a duel? Just go out and find him."

Mao Shiba let out a forced laugh without answering. When he said he was going to find Oboi and challenge him the other day, it was on an impulse while his frame of mind was in rage. Although he was a hot-headed and crude warrior, after all, he had been wandering the Jianghu for more than twenty years, how could he not know that Oboi was an important official in command of tens of thousands of men? How could he have a martial art competition with an ordinary Jianghu man? His own martial art skill was only a second or third class, if Oboi was indeed the Manchu's number one warrior, most likely Mao Shiba was not Oboi's match. However, he had boasted in front of Wei Xiaobao, he simply must go to Beijing. He was thinking he would take this child strolling around Beijing for about ten days or half a month, enjoying the scenery of the capital, merrily drinking and eating, and then he would send the child back to Yangzhou. Undoubtedly Oboi was unwilling to have a martial art contest, so he did not have any choice, it was not because he did not dare, so Wei Xiaobao could not mock him as gutless. In a very slim chance that Oboi agreed to have a duel, Mao Shiba would definitely stake his old life to fight him.

The two of them reached a small wine shop in the western part of the city. Mao Shiba ordered some food and wine. While he was drinking, two men entered the wine shop, one old, the other young. The old one was roughly sixty years old, while the

young one looked around twelve or thirteen. Both were wearing strange looking attire. Wei Xiaobao did not know what kind of people they were, but Mao Shiba was aware that those two were eunuchs from the Imperial Palace. The old one had a sickly complexion, his back was bent at the waist, and he did not stop coughing, as if he was suffering from a serious illness. The young one was helping him, slowly walking to sit at a table.

With a shrill and raspy voice the old eunuch said, “Bring me some wine!” The wine shop attendant responded repeatedly and hastily took out some wine. The old eunuch took out a package wrapped in paper from his pocket and opened it. Very carefully he used the tip of his fingernail to scoop a little bit of its content and dissolved it into the wine. He put the medicine package inside his pocket before picking up the wine cup and slowly drank the wine. A short moment later he went into convulsion; his body shook continuously.

The wine shop attendant panicked. “What is it? What happened?” he asked.

“Get out of the way!” the little eunuch shouted, “It’s none of your business!” The wine shop attendant bowed and forced a smile; he walked away, but did not stop looking at the two.

The old eunuch used both hands to prop himself on the table, his teeth chattered, his body shook more and more violently. A moment later, even the table was shaking that the chopsticks on the table fell down to the floor.

The little eunuch panicked, “Gong-gong[36],” he said, “How about another dose?” while reaching out to fetch the medicine package from his pocket. He was about to open the package when with a shrill voice the old eunuch said, “No … no … I don’t want …” His expression looked pressing. The little eunuch held the medicine package in his hand, he did not dare to open it.

Right that moment they heard footsteps outside the inn’s door,

seven big men walked in. They all naked on top, but wore leather pants on the bottom; their hair braided into pigtails on top of their heads. Their entire body was greasy, glistening under the light, very unsightly; it seemed like their bodies, from head to toes, were smeared with some kind of oil. All seven of them had sturdy muscle like young dragon, their chests were hairy, and their mouth were covered in black mustache; when they stretched out their arms, all their palms were huge with thick fingers. Seven men sat on two tables and shouted in their mumbling speech, “Bring out the wine and some beef and fat chicken, the quicker the better!”

“Yes, yes!” the wine shop attendant replied, while busily setting up chopsticks. “Master Guest,” he asked, “What would you like to eat?”

“Are you deaf?” one of the men bellowed. Another man suddenly reached out and grabbed the wine shop attendant on his waist, raising his arm straight up, he brought the attendant up in the air. The wine shop attendant’s hands and feet flailing randomly, he cried out ‘Wah! Wah!’ in fright. The men roared in laughter. The one holding the attendant flung him outside the shop, 'Bang!' the attendant hit the ground. "Aiyo! Mommy!" the wine shop attendant cried out. The men laughed even louder.

In low voice Mao Shiba said, "What they are doing is a wresting technique. The victim must be thrown far away; if he fell close by, he could spring up and counter-attack."

"Do you know any wrestling?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"I haven't learned it," Mao Shiba replied, "This kind of 'hard' skill is useless against a martial art expert."

"Can you beat them, then?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Mao Shiba said with a laugh, "What good is it for me to beat those boorish men?"

"But you are alone against the seven them, you will definitely

lose," Wei Xiaobao said.

"They are not my match," Mao Shiba said.

Wei Xiaobao suddenly raised his voice, "Hey, big men, my friend here says he alone can beat the seven of you."

"Don't create trouble!" Mao Shiba sternly said. But Wei Xiaobao liked nothing better than creating trouble. Seeing without any reason those seven men tossed the wine shop attendant that he was half-dead half-alive, his heart was angered; hearing Mao Shiba said that he alone could beat the seven of them, he deliberately provoked them, with the hope that Mao Shiba would teach them a lesson.

The seven big men turned their gaze toward Mao and Wei, two people. "Little baby," one of them said, "What did you say?"

Wei Xiaobao replied, "My friend here says, you bullied the wine shop attendant, you cannot be considered hero or warrior. If you have guts, come and fight him."

One of the men glowered and said to Mao Shiba, "Son of a b*tch, did you say that?"

Mao Shiba knew those seven men were Manchurian wrestlers; at first he did not want to create any trouble, but first of all, he was angry just by looking at a Manchu, secondly, the Manchu was cursing him. Lifting up the wine pot, he threw it toward the man's face. The man reached out to catch the pot; to his surprise, however, in this throw Mao Shiba had used his internal strength. 'Crack!' the wine pot hit the man's arm. "Aiyo!" the man cried out for he felt severe pain on his arm. Another man pounced on Mao Shiba, which he responded by a flying kick. Manchurian wrestlers very seldom used their legs, the man was unable to dodge this kick, his lower abdomen was squarely hit, he was sent flying backward.

The other five men cursed, "Scoundrel bastard!" and pounced together. Mao Shiba was quick and agile, unleashing his *qin na*

[grab and capture, grappling technique] skill, his elbow struck his palm hacked, in a short time he managed to knock down four men. The last one slanted his body sideways to take Mao Shiba's palm on his shoulder, while he reached out to grab Mao Shiba's lower back and lifted him up. He was about to turn Mao Shiba's body around to dash his head against the stone steps; Mao Shiba suddenly launched a chain kick, 'puff! puff!' twice his feet landed on the pit of that man's stomach. The man's mouth opened, blood spurted out wildly, his grab loosened instantly.

The man fell face up, Mao Shiba followed and kicked him hard with both feet on the pit of his stomach, then with both palms he launched the 'tornado brushing the willow', hacking diagonally down toward the back of the first man, the one hit by the wine pot. 'Crack!' several of the man's ribs were broken; he scrambled onto a table.

With one hand Mao Shiba pulled Wei Xiaobao and said, "Little demon, you really know how to get into trouble, let's go quickly!'

The two of them dashed toward the door of the shop. But they only took two steps when they saw the stooped-down old eunuch was standing at the door. Mao Shiba reached out to lightly push his right arm, he only wanted him to push him aside. To his surprise, as his palm touched the old eunuch's shoulder, Mao Shiba felt a violent jolt; he could not help but stagger and fell several steps sideways, his right waist bumped into a table, immediately the table toppled over.

The momentum of the fall had brought Wei Xiaobao along. Wei Xiaobao yelled, “Aiyo hey, Mommy, it hurts! I am dead!”

Mao Shiba quickly held on to the table and only then was he able to stand. He felt his entire body was boiling, as if he was roasted alive. Inwardly he was greatly shocked. Looking at the old eunuch; he saw the old eunuch was still bending down at the waist and did not stop coughing, seemingly oblivious of

what had just happened. Mao Shiba knew that he had met an expert today, most likely the opponent was using sorcery; otherwise, even if one had a much higher level of martial art skill than himself, one could not possibly turn his light push into a tremendous force like that. Although there existed skill such as 'borrowing force to counter-attack' within the martial art study, this kind of 'with four *tael* pulling a thousand *catty*' technique needs opponent's large force to produce a large force reaction; there has never been any skill turning a light force into a large one.

Mao Shiba turned around; grabbing Wei Xiaobao, who was still screaming and yelling, he bolted toward the rear of the shop. Yet after taking only three steps, he heard a coughing and saw the old eunuch had already stood in front of him. Mao Shiba was startled, exerting all his strength into his feet, he leaned forward as if he wanted to pounce of the opponent, but just as quick he sprang backward. Before his feet even touch the ground, he felt a light force on his back. Hastily his left hand struck backhandedly, but it hit an empty air. His body was thrown forward and landed on the bodies of two men. It was a heavy fall, fortunately the men were fat and sturdy, with their thick flesh as cushion, they did not suffer any injury.

Those two men's legs were broken, they were unable to stand; however, their hands were unaffected. Immediately they used their wrestling skill to grab Mao Shiba firmly. Mao Shiba wanted to struggle free, but his limbs were devoid of any strength; turned out the acupoint on his back was sealed by the old eunuch.

Mao Shiba fell face down, he was unable to see what was happening behind his back, he only heard the old eunuch was coughing continuously, and blaming the young eunuch with weak voice, "You want me to take another dose, aren't you deliberately trying to kill me? Just another half of a dose more,

then my old life would be gone. (Cough ... cough ... cough ... cough.) You, little kid, really want to create trouble."

The young eunuch said, "Child really did not know; next time I will not dare."

"Will there be next time?" the old eunuch said, "Ay, I don't even know if I will live in a few days. (Cough ... cough ... cough ... cough.)"

"Gong-gong," the little eunuch said, "Where did this man come from? I am afraid he is a rebel thief."

"Friends," the old eunuch addressed the men, "Which palace are you from?"

"Reporting to Gong-gong," one of the men replied, "We are from Zheng *Wangye*'s Palace. If not for Gong-gong's help by catching this rebel thief, we might lose a lot of face today."

"Humph," the old eunuch said, "Just ... just consider it a coincidence. (Cough ... cough ... cough.) You don't have to raise any alarm, just send this man and that child to the catering department of the Imperial Palace, tell them they are wanted by Hai *Laogong* [lit. ‘Old eunuch’]."

The men responded with one voice. The old eunuch said, "Why haven't you called a sedan chair? Looking at my condition, do you think I can still walk?" The little eunuch complied and dashed out the door. The old eunuch bent down on a table, while still coughing nonstop.

Seeing Mao Shiba was captured, Wei Xiaobao remembered a storyteller once said, "Living on a green mountain, no need to fear there won't be any firewood to cook." Must smear some grease on the soles of the feet, execute the thirty-sixth stratagem, if all else fails, retreat! Creeping quietly along the wall, he wanted to slip away from the back of the shop. Seeing that nobody was paying attention, he was feeling very happy inwardly when the old eunuch flicked his finger, sending a

chopstick flying toward Wei Xiaobao. The chopstick stabbed the back of his right knee.

Wei Xiaobao's right leg went numb and he toppled down on the floor, unable to move another step. His mouth immediately went into assault mode, "Tuberculosis sickly old turtle demon ..." But then he saw one of the big man was glowering at him fiercely, he was scared and the next ten malicious sentences went back into his belly.

Not too long afterwards, a sedan chair arrived outside the door. The little eunuch walked in and announced, "Gong-gong's sedan chair is here!"

Still coughing incessantly, supported by the young eunuch, the old eunuch entered the sedan chair, which was lifted by two porters and carried away, with the little eunuch following behind. Among the seven men, four only suffered light injury. These four men tightly bound Mao Shiba and Wei Xiaobao with rope. While doing that, they did not stop punching and kicking Mao Shiba. Wei Xiaobao could not stop his mouth from hurling dirty words, but two hard slaps on his ear left him with no choice but quietly accept his fate without making any noise.

The men also called for two sedan chairs. They squeezed a piece of cloth on Mao Shiba and Wei Xiaobao’s mouths, and used a piece of black cloth to cover their eyes before loading them onto the sedan chairs and took them away. When he was seven, Wei Xiaobao had ridden on a sedan chair with his mother on their way to burn incense. This time, without any better option, he consoled himself, “Damn it, *laozi* had not ridden a sedan chair for a long time; today filial sons are taking a good care of *laozi* by letting *laozi* riding on a sedan chair. What a good son, what a good grandson!” But thinking about whether he was accompanying Mao Shiba to the execution ground, he could not help shuddering in fear.

Inside the sedan chair, Wei Xiaobao was completely blinded,

he only felt the sedan chair was always moving. Sometimes they stopped and he heard someone would ask a question, and the man accompanying the sedan chair would always reply, "Catering Department, on Hai *Laogong-gong*'s order." Wei Xiaobao did not know what kind of place the Catering Department was, but that Hai *Laogong* was definitely a person of authority. With the man escorting them, the sedan chair proceeded unhindered. Once the person asking question uncovered the curtain of the sedan chair; he peered inside and said, "It's only a baby!" Wei Xiaobao wanted to say, "It's your ancestor!" It was a pity that his mouth was stuffed with the cloth, so that he was unable to say anything.

The journey was long and uneventful that Wei Xiaobao almost fell asleep. Suddenly the sedan chair stopped, and someone said, "The people wanted by Hai Gong-gong are here."

A boy's voice replied, "Right, Hai Gong-gong is resting, just leave them here." Hearing the voice, Wei Xiaobao recognized the speaker as the boy he came across at the wine shop.

He heard the first voice said, "We are going back to report to Zheng *Wangye*, I am sure *Wangye* will send someone to thank Hai *Laogong*."

"Very well," the boy replied, "Please tell *Wangye* Hai *Laogong* sends his respect."

"We don't deserve it," the man replied.

And then Mao Shiba and Wei Xiaobao were dragged out of the sedan chairs, brought into the room, and laid down on the floor. They heard voices and footsteps were getting further away, but they could hear old eunuch Hai's coughing quite clearly.

Wei Xiaobao smelled an extremely strong medicinal smell, he thought, "This old demon is so sick that he is about to die soon, too bad he did not die several days earlier. It seems that he wanted me and Mao *Dage* to be the herald announcing his

arrival to the *Yan Wang* [Yama, King of Hell]."

It was very quiet all around them, other than old eunuch Hai occasional coughs, they did not hear anything else. Wei Xiaobao's limbs were bound, his fingers and toes grew numb; his discomfort was unbearable, it was as if old eunuch Hai had forgotten all about them and did not take any notice of them.

After a very long time, they finally heard old eunuch Hai's soft voice calling out, "Xiao Guizi [lit. 'little cassia/cinnamon/laurel']!"

"Here!" the little boy replied. Wei Xiaobao mused, "Turns out this stinky kid is called Xiao Guizi. Your name also has the same 'Xiao' character as your grandpa."

He heard the old eunuch Hai said, "Untie those two, I want to question them."

"Yes!" Xiao Guizi replied.

Wei Xiaobao heard some scraping noise, presumably Xiao Guizi used a knife to cut the rope binding Mao Shiba's hands and feet. A moment later, the rope tying his own hands and feet was also cut, followed by the cloth covering his eyes were taken away. As he opened his eyes, Wei Xiaobao could see that they were in a large room, which was sparsely furnished. There was only a table and one chair, with a teapot and teacup on the table. The old eunuch Hai was sitting, half-reclining, on the chair; his cheeks were very deep, his eyes were half-open half-closed. By this time the sky had turned dark. There were two flaming candles on the wall, held by a couple of copper candle holders. The flame swayed, making old eunuch Hai's sallow face flicker between light and dark. Xiao Guizi took the cloth stuffed inside Mao Shiba's mouth out.

"This child's mouth is unclean, let him be gagged a while longer," old eunuch Hai said.

Wei Xiaobao's hands were free, but he did not dare to take

the cloth out himself. Perhaps the obscenities he hurled in his heart were ten times worse than the old eunuch Hai could ever imagined.

The old eunuch Hai said, "Go get a chair, let him sit down." Xiao Guizi went into the next room and brought back a chair, which he set next to Mao Shiba. Mao Shiba sat down immediately. Seeing he was not given any chair, without any care Wei Xiaobao sat down on the floor.

"*Laoxiong*," old eunuch Hai addressed Mao Shiba, "May I know your honorable surname and your great name? Which family or school do you belong to? Your *qin na* technique is not bad, apparently not part of our northern style martial art."

"My surname is Mao," Mao Shiba replied, "I am called Mao Shiba. I belong to the *Five Tigers Breaking the Gates* Saber School of Taizhou, Jiangbei."

The old eunuch Hai nodded and said, "Mao Shiba, Mao *Laoxiong*, I have heard about your reputation. I heard around the Yangzhou area *Laoxiong* has plundered and killed some officers to escape from prison. It was quite an accomplishment indeed."

"That's right," Mao Shiba said. He could not help but to admit defeat to this sickly, tuberculosis old eunuch's astonishing martial art skill, so he did not dare to openly contradicting him.

The old eunuch Hai said, "What is the purpose of your visit to the capital, Sire? Do you care to share it with me?"

Mao Shiba said, "Since I am already fallen into your hands, you want to kill, you want to hack, I am entirely at your disposal, the one surnamed Mao is a Jianghu man, I won't wrinkle my brows. If you want to extort a confession, you are misjudging me."

The old eunuch Hai showed a faint smile as he said, "Who does not know that Mao Shiba is a firm, real man? I would not

dare to extort your confession. I heard that Sire is Pingxi[37] *Wangye*'s trusted aide ..."

He had not finished speaking when Mao Shiba's anger rose, he shouted, "Who has anything to do with this big traitor Wu Sangui? By saying such thing, you are smearing Mao Shiba's reputation as a patriot."

The old eunuch Hai coughed several times, with a faint smile he said, "Pingxi *Wangye* has rendered great merit to the Great Qing, His Majesty has a really high regard of him. If Sire is Pingxi *Wangye*'s man, by looking at Pingxi *Wangye*'s face, such a trivial offense need not be haggled over."

"I am not, I am not!" Mao Shiba shouted loudly, "Mao Shiba and that stinky thief Wu Sangui do not have any relation whatsoever, the one surnamed Mao is unwilling to receive any favor from this big traitor to China. If you want to kill just kill, if you say I was this Wu thief's trusted aide, surnamed Mao's ancestors were all rotten and moldy."

Wu Sangui had led the Qing army entering the pass, to the extent that the Ming Dynasty was subjugated to the foreign power. At the marketplace, whenever the name Wu Sangui was mentioned, Wei Xiaobao always heard the phrases 'traitor to China', 'stinky thief', or 'his mother thief' added to his name; he thought, "From this old turtle's tone, if only Mao *Dage* is willing to admit that he is Wu Sangui's trusted aide, the old turtle would let us go. Too bad that Mao *Dage*'s bones are too stiff and he is unwilling to pretend to be one. But his bones are stiff, his skin and flesh will suffer. The common saying is right, 'A real man won't be at a disadvantage from the outset', naturally those who are disadvantaged are not hero or real men. There is no harm for us to speak nonsense, saying Wu Sangui regards the two of us with such care. When we escape alive, it won't be too late to curse Wu Sangui's eighteen generations ancestors."

Gradually the blood in his hands and feet was able to flow again; quietly he brought his sleeve to cover his face as he take away the cloth gagging his mouth. The old eunuch Hai's gaze was focused on Mao Shiba's expression, he did not see Wei Xiaobao playing trick in secret.

Seeing Mao Shiba's stern expression, the old eunuch Hai smiled and said, "I thought Sire was sent to the capital by Pingxi *Wangye*; turns out I was wrong."

Mao Shiba thought, "This time I am being captured in Beijing, the footstool of the Emperor himself, obviously I won't escape with my life. A dead leopard leaves behind its skin, a dead man leaves his name. Mao Shiba's death is nothing, but I must not be an obscure person." He noticed Wei Xiaobao was looking at him helplessly, he loudly said, "Let me be honest with you, in the south I heard a rumor in Jianghu that Oboi is Manchu's number one warrior, that he is able to kill a wild bull with his palm, that he is able to kick tigers and leopard; people always give an exaggerated account of things. The one surnamed Mao refuses to accept; therefore, I came to Beijing with the special purpose of challenging him to a duel."

The old eunuch Hai sighed. "You want to have a duel with Oboi?" he said, "Oboi has reached the highest rank of officialdom. In Beijing, he is inferior only to the Emperor and Empress Dowager. Even if *laoxiong* waits in Bejing for eight years, ten years, you might not necessarily be able to see him, how can you have a duel with him?"

At first Mao Shiba believed the old eunuch Hai was using some kind of sorcery, afterwards the acupoint on his back was sealed, and only now did it gradually become unsealed; he knew he was facing an expert in internal energy cultivation. Looking at the old eunuch's expression and the tone of his voice, Mao Shiba guessed the old eunuch was a Manchu. If he was not an old, sickly Manchu's match, what chance did he have against

the Manchu's number one warrior? When he fought Shi Song and his troops at the Victory Hill of Yangzhou, although the situation was critical, he was not in the least bit desperate; but now, facing this ghost eunuch suffering for tuberculosis, unexpectedly his heroic spirit disappeared completely. In the end, he could only heaved a deep sigh.

The old eunuch Hai asked, "Do you still want to have a duel with Oboi, Sire?"

"May I ask, how is that Oboi's martial art skill compared to Your Excellency?" Mao Shiba asked.

The old eunuch Hai smiled faintly as he said, "Oboi is a great minister who has both military and civil talents, with matchless glory and splendor. I am but a cruel-fated, despicable person. While Oboi is high in the sky, I am low on the earth, how can we be compared?" He was speaking only about the difference in two people's status, unexpectedly not one sentence about martial art ability was even mentioned.

Mao Shiba said, "If that Oboi has half of your martial art skill, I am definitely not his match."

The old eunuch Hai said with a smile, "*Laoxiong* is too modest. Tell me, with my shallow martial art skill, if I want to compare it to Chen Jinnan's, how do you think I will fare?"

Mao Shiba sprang up and said, "You ... you ... what did you say?"

The old eunuch Hai said, "I am talking about your respected society's *Zongduozhu*, Chen Jinnan. I heard Chen *Zongduozhu* practices ‘Blood Clotting Divine Claw’, his internal energy cultivation is unfathomably deep. It's a pity we are not destined to see each other; I am a despicable person, I do not have the fortune to pay Chen *Zongduozhu* a visit."

"I don't belong to Tian Di Hui, and I don't have the fortune to pay Chen *Zongduozhu* a visit either," Mao Shiba said, "I only

heard Chen *Zongduozhu*'s martial art skill to be very high, how high or what his technique looks like, I can't possibly know."

The old eunuch Hai sighed and said, “Mao *Xiong*, I have known from the start that you are a good man. With this kind of good skill, why don’t you serve the imperial household? You may be a provincial governor in the future, or even a general won’t be out of question. If you follow Tian Di Hui starting a rebellion, ay …” He shook his head, and then continued, “You won’t have a good end. Let me give you an advice, you’d better rein the horse at the edge of the precipice, withdraw from Tian Di Hui.”

“I … I … I am not a Tian Di Hui’s member,” Mao Shiba said. Suddenly he raised his voice and said, “It’s not that I am denying that I am one of them. The one surnamed Mao wishes to become a member of the Tian Di Hui, it’s just that I do not have anybody to sponsor me. There is a saying in Jianghu: ‘Whoever never knew Chen Jinnan, he calls himself a hero in vain’. Hai *Laogong*, I believe you have also heard this saying. The one surnamed Mao is definitely a Han, although I haven’t joined the Tian Di Hui, I am determined to fight the Qing and restore the Ming; how can you advise me to serve the Qing and become a traitor to Han instead? Just kill me quickly; the one surnamed Mao has killed and burned, my crimes are too great, I should have died early on. It’s just that I have never seen Chen Jinnan, so there’s a part of me which does not want to die with closed eyes.”

The old eunuch Hai said, “You, Han people, refuse to accept Manchu’s rule over the land under the heaven, there’s nothing wrong with that. I respect you as a real man, so I won’t kill you today. I am going to let you see Chen Jinnan first, so that you can die with your eyes closed. The earlier you see him the better. When you see him, tell him that Hai *Laogong* wants to see him very much, I want to try his ‘Blood Clotting Divine

Claw', I want to see how formidable it really is. I wish for him to come to the capital as soon as he can. Ay, the old man don't have too many days left, if Chen *Zongduozhu* does not come to Beijing soon, I won't be able to see him at all. Hey, hey, 'Whoever never knew Chen Jinnan, he calls himself a hero in vain'! I want to see what kind of hero Chen Jinnan really is, why does he have such a big reputation in the Jianghu?"

Hearing that the old eunuch Hai unexpectedly agreed to let him go, Mao Shiba was taken aback. He stood motionless and did not walk out immediately. "What are you waiting for?" the old eunuch Hai said, "Why haven't you left?"

"Right!" Mao Shiba said. He turned around and pulled Wei Xiaobao's hand along. He wanted to say something nice, but did not know what to say.

The old eunuch Hai sighed. "In vain you have been wandering around the Jianghu for a long time, even a little bit of custom you do not understand. You just want to walk away without leaving anything?"

Mao Shiba clenched his teeth. "You're right, the one surnamed Mao is negligent. Little brother, lend me your knife, I'll cut my left hand for you," he said, while pointing to the dagger by the little eunuch, Xiao Guizi. The dagger was approximately eight *cun* [cun is a unit of length, approximately an inch or a thumb], it was the dagger Xiao Guizi used to cut the rope binding their hands and feet.

"Just a left hand is not enough," old eunuch Hai said.

Mao Shiba's face turned ashen. "Do you want me to cut my right hand as well?" he asked.

The old eunuch Hai nodded. "That's right," he said, "Both hands. Actually, I also want your pair of eyes, (cough … cough …) but I figure you want to see Chen Jinnan. If you don't have any eyes, you won't be able to see him. Let's do this: gouge

your left eye, you may keep the right eye!”

Mao Shiba took two steps back and let Wei Xiaobao’s hand go. His left palm raised, his right hand slanting with palm down, in the ‘Rhinoceros Gazing at the Moon’ stance, thinking, “You want to gouge my left eye, and break my both hands, why would I want to live as a cripple? I’d rather stake everything to fight you, if I die in your palm, that will be the end of it.”

The old eunuch Hai did not even look at him; he coughed repeatedly, his coughing was getting more violent, until at last he could not breathe at all. His originally sallow face had turned red and swollen.

“Gong-gong,” Xiao Guizi said, “How about another dose?”

The old eunuch Hai shook his head repeatedly, but his coughing did not stop. A moment later he could not take it anymore, he stood up and grabbed his own neck with his left hand, his expression showed extreme pain.

“If I don’t leave now, what am I waiting for?” Mao Shiba mused. With a leap he pulled Wei Xiaobao’s hand and bolted toward the door. The old eunuch Hai pinched the table with his right hand’s thumb and index finger, immediately a piece of wood broke off. ‘Swish!’ he flicked it out. Mao Shiba was a large stride away from the door, the piece of wood struck the *futu* [crouching rabbit] acupoint on his right leg. Immediately his right leg went numb and he fell kneeling down on the floor. Another ‘Swish!’ was heard as another piece of wood flew and struck the acupoint on Mao Shiba’s left leg. Amidst the old eunuch Hai’s coughing, taking Wei Xiaobao along, Mao Shiba rolled down on the ground.

“Take half a dose,” Xiao Guizi said, “It won’t do you any harm.”

“Alright, alright,” the old eunuch Hai said, “Just … just a little bit. Too much … it’s too dangerous.”

“Yes!” Xiao Guizi replied, while reaching out to get the medicine pouch from his pocket. He turned around toward the other room, and went back out with a cup of wine. Opening up the pouch, he took a little bit of powder with the nail of his little finger. “Too … too much,” old eunuch Hai said.

“Yes!” Xiao Guizi said, returning some of the powder on his nail back into the pouch, his eyes were at the old eunuch Hai. The old eunuch Hai nodded. He bent down again and started coughing; suddenly he threw his body forward, he crawled on the floor and did not stop twisting and turning.

Xiao Guizi was greatly alarmed, he rushed forward and cried out, “Gong-gong, Gong-gong, what happens?”

Gasping for breath, the old eunuch Hai said, “Hot … it’s hot … help … help me … to water … water tub to soak … soak …”

“Yes!” Xiao Guizi replied, as he struggled to help him up. The two of them staggered together into the inner room, followed by splashing noise of the water.

All of these did not escape Wei Xiaobao’s eyes. He got up quietly and tiptoed to the table. Stretching out his little finger, he took three fingernails full of medicinal powder and dumped it into the wine. Afraid it was not enough, he took two more fingernails, and then folded the medicine pouch and re-opened it, and thus erasing the fingernail mark from the powder.

He heard Xiao Guizi in the inner room said, “Gong-gong, is it enough? Please don’t soak too long.” “Hot … I’m hot …” the old eunuch Hai said, “It feels like I am being roasted.” Seeing the dagger lying on the table, Wei Xiaobao took it in his hand, and went back toward Mao Shiba and lay down on the floor.

Not too long afterwards, the splashing noise diminished. Dripping wet, the old eunuch Hai came out of the inner room, supported by Xiao Guizi. He had not stopped coughing. Xiao Guizi took the wine cup from the table and brought it to his

mouth. The old eunuch Hai was still coughing and did not drink immediately. Wei Xiaobao felt his heart was about to jump out his throat.

The old eunuch Hai said, “If I can not take … it’s best if I not … not take the medicine.”

“Yes!” Xiao Guizi said, putting the wine cup back on the table. He wrapped the medicine pouch securely and put it back into the old eunuch Hai’s pocket. But the old eunuch Hai’s coughing was getting worse. He pointed to the wine cup. Xiao Guizi picked up the wine cup and brought it to his mouth. The old eunuch Hai drank it in one gulp.

Mao Shiba was unable to remain calm and let out a cry, “Ah!”

The old eunuch Hai said, “You … if you think … you can escape alive …” Suddenly with a crash the chair collapsed. The old eunuch Hai crouched on the table, but he was leaning with such a tremendous force that, with two loud crashes, the table and the person collapsed together.

In great alarm Xiao Guizi screamed, “Gong-gong, Gong-gong!” as he rushed forward to help the old eunuch Hai up, his back was facing Mao Shiba and Wei Xiaobao. Wei Xiaobao lightly sprang up, raising his dagger he drove it ferociously on Xiao Guizi’s back. Xiao Guizi let out a low groan and died instantly. The old eunuch Hai was still twisting and turning on the floor. Wei Xiaobao raised his dagger and aimed it at the old eunuch Hai’s back, ready to drive it down again. Right this moment, the old eunuch Hai lifted up his head and said, “Xiao … Xiao Guizi, something’s wrong with the medicine.”

Wei Xiaobao was scared out of his wits, how could he dare to drive his dagger down? The old eunuch Hai turned around and reached out, he grabbed Wei Xiaobao’s left wrist as he said, “Xiao Guizi, the medicine just now, haven’t you made a mistake?”

“No … no mistake,” Wei Xiaobao mumbled his response. He felt as if his left wrist was clamped with an iron hoop, the pain penetrated his bone. In his fright, he withdrew the dagger in his right hand about a *cun.*

With a trembling voice the old eunuch Hai said, “Quick … quickly light the candle, it’s so dark in here, I can’t … can’t see anything.”

Wei Xiaobao was greatly puzzled, the candles were burning bright, why did he say it was so dark? “Could it be that he is blinded?” Thereupon he said, “The candle is still burning, Gong-gong, you … can’t you see?”

Both he and Xiao Guizi still had their children’s voice, but Xiao Guizi spoke with Manchurian Bannerman[38] official’s accent, which Wei Xiaobao could not learn in such a short time, and thus he was mumbling with the hope that the old eunuch Hai would not discover it.

The old eunuch Hai said, “I … I can’t see a thing, who says the candle is burning? Quickly light it up!” While saying that, he let Wei Xiaobao’s wrist go.

“Yes! Yes!” Wei Xiaobao said. He walked away hurriedly toward the candle-holder hanging on the wall. Reaching up, he fiddled the copper ring of the candle-holder, creating some clinking noise, and said, “It’s lighted!”

“What?” the old eunuch Hai said, “Nonsense! Why haven’t you lighted the candle …?” He had not finished speaking when his body twisting and he fell face up on the floor.

Wei Xiaobao gestured anxiously to Mao Shiba, telling him to run away quickly. Mao Shiba waved back at him, wanting him to escape together. Wei Xiaobao turned toward the door, but he heard the old eunuch Hai whispering and groaning, “Xiao … Xiao Guizi, Xiao … Xiao Guizi, you …”

Wei Xiaobao replied, “Yes, I am here!” His left hand beckoned Mao Shiba to escape first, since he must find a way to deal with the old eunuch Hai. Mao Shiba struggled to stand up, but the acupoints on both of his legs were sealed. Reaching down, he tried to massage the acupoints, but after exerting all his strength, nothing happened at all. He thought, “My legs are incapable of moving, I must crawl out. This child is as crafty as a ghost, besides, he is only a child, nobody will pay him any attention, it won’t be difficult for him to escape. If he is coming with me and we come across an enemy, he may be implicated instead.” Therefore, he waved toward Wei Xiaobao and put his hands down to quietly crawl out.

The old eunuch Hai’s whispering and groaning was sometimes soft, sometimes audible. Wei Xiaobao did not dare to leave for fear that the old eunuch Hai found Xiao Guizi was dead and thus raised an alarm; if his subordinates started to surround them, it would be difficult for Mao Shiba and him to escape. He thought, “I caused all these disasters. Mao *Dage* cannot walk, I don’t know how long will it take for him to escape, I’d better stay here to stall a little bit. As long as the old turtle would not discover that I am an impostor, I will be alright. This old turtle is so sick that his mind is muddled, I’ll wait till he pass out, then I’ll kill him with a stab, and then I can escape.”

A little while later, he heard the distant ‘de du de du dang, de du de du dang’ of the night watchman, indicating it was the first watch of the night [11 pm – 1 am]. Wei Xiaobao saw the candle sparkled, it suddenly brightened; the candle on his left had been burned to the very end, it would soon die out. He saw Xiao Guizi’s body curling up and was very scared. “I killed him,” he mused, “When he turns into a ghost, will he come back to demand his life back from me?” He also thought, “If I wait till daybreak, it will be more difficult to escape, I must run away in the middle of the night when it is still dark.” But the old eunuch Hai was still groaning, he had not lost his consciousness at all.

He was lying face up on the floor. Even if Wei Xiaobao had more guts, he would not dare to raise his dagger and plunge it toward the old eunuch Hai's pit of the stomach or perhaps his lower abdomen, knowing that this old man's martial art was extremely formidable; as soon as the dagger hit his flesh, he would regain consciousness, if he strike with his palm, Wei Xiaobao's brain would definitely be dashed out.

After another while, the other candle also died out. In the darkness, Wei Xiaobao was thinking that Xiao Guizi's corpse was within reach; he was terribly scared and his only hope was that he could escape as early as possible. But as soon his body moved, the old eunuch Hai called out, "Xiao … Xiao Guizi, you … are you here?"

"I am here!" Wei Xiaobao did not have any choice.

More than an hour later, he tiptoed toward the door. The old eunuch Hai called out again, "Xiao Guizi, where are you going?"

"I … I want to go pee," Wei Xiaobao replied.

The old eunuch Hai asked, "Why … why not pee inside?"

"Yes, yes," Wei Xiaobao replied. He went to the inner chamber, the one he had never been in before. He had just walked into the door and took a couple of steps when 'bang!' his kneecap bumped into the corner of a table.

Outside, the old eunuch Hai asked, "Xiao … Xiao Guizi, what … what are you doing?"

"No … nothing!" Wei Xiaobao replied. Stretching out his arm he groped around the table to find a fire knife or a flint. Hastily he struck the flint and lighted a fire paper. He saw several dozens of candles on the table, immediately he lighted one and plugged it into a candlestick. He saw a large bed and a small bed in the room, which he presumed must be the old eunuch Hai and Xiao Guizi's. There were also several chests, a table and a cabinet; other than that, there was nothing else. On the

east end there was a large tub, which looked extremely tall to him, underneath the tub the water splashed everywhere.

He was contemplating whether he could run away from the window, when the old eunuch Hai called out from the outside, “Why haven’t you peed yet?”

Wei Xiaobao was startled, “Why doesn’t he stop calling me? Could it be that he heard something wrong in my voice and grew suspicious? Otherwise, whether I pee or not, it is not a fart business of his.” Thereupon he answered at once, “Yes!” From underneath the small bed he groped out a chamber pot. He peed while looking at the window. He saw the window was tightly shut, each window panel was covered with silk paper; he thought it must be because the old eunuch Hai’s coughing was so severe that he was afraid of catching cold, therefore, not a draft of cold air was allowed to come in. If he opened the window by force, the old eunuch Hai would definitely hear it. Most probably before he could even get out, he would be captured. He looked everywhere around the room, looking for a place where he could escape, but even a hole in the wall to let the dog or the cat in and out was non-existent. If he escaped from the front room, the old eunuch Hai would definitely find out. Suddenly with the corner of his eyes he caught sight of a set of new clothes by the corner of Xiao Guizi’s bed; he had an idea. Hurriedly he shed his own clothes and put the new set on.

From the outside the old eunuch Hai called again, “Xiao Guizi, what … what are you doing?”

“I am coming, I am coming!” Wei Xiaobao replied. He walked out while fastening his buttons. He picked up Xiao Guizi’s hat and put it on his own head, while saying, “The candles died out, I’ll light another one.” Returning to the room, he picked two candles and lighted both.

The old eunuch Hai heaved a sigh and in a low voice asked, “Have you really lighted the candles?”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Don’t tell me you cannot see?”

The old eunuch Hai was silent for half a day. He coughed several times before answering, “I was fully aware the medicine must not be taken too much, but the coughing was really … was really … too painful. Ay, although each time I only take a little, but accumulated over a long period of time, the toxicity is too heavy, until finally … finally my eyes failed.”

In his heart Wei Xiaobao felt relieved, “The old guy did not know I added medicinal powder into his wine; he thought it was because he had taken the drug for a long time that the effect accumulated and flared out just now.”

He heard the old eunuch Hai asked again, “Xiao Guizi, how did Gong-gong usually treat you?”

Wei Xiaobao had no idea how the old eunuch Hai usually treated Xiao Guizi, he quickly said, “Very good, actually.”

The old eunuch Hai said, “Um, now that Gong-gong … is blind, in this whole world, only you alone will take care of me. You wouldn’t leave Gong-gong, wouldn’t … wouldn’t ignore me, would you?”

“I … of course I won’t?” Wei Xiaobao said.

“You are not telling me lie?” the old eunuch Hai asked.

“Naturally not the least bit of lie,” Wei Xiaobao said. He replied without the slightest hesitation, in addition, his tone was so sincere that it was impossible for the old eunuch Hai not to be moved. He added, “Gong-gong, you have no one to keep you company, if I don’t keep you company, who will? I think your eyes will get well in a few days, you don’t have to worry.”

The old eunuch Hai sighed and said, “They won’t get well, they won’t get well!” After a moment, he asked, “Has that one surnamed Mao run away?”

“Yes!” Wei Xiaobao replied.

“Did you kill the child he brought along?” the old eunuch Hai asked.

Wei Xiaobao’s heart was thumping wildly, he answered, “Yes! His … his body; what should we do with it?”

The old eunuch Hai contemplated for a while, and then said, “We have a dead body in our room, if people find out, they will ask questions, very troublesome. You … get my medicine box out.”

“Yes!” Wei Xiaobao replied. He entered the inner room, but did not see any medicine box, so he opened the cabinet drawers one by one to look for it.

Suddenly the old eunuch Hai said angrily, “What are you doing? Who … who told you to randomly open the drawers?”

Wei Xiaobao sprang up in fright, he thought, "Turns out I am not supposed to open these drawers," he said, “I am looking for the medicine box, I don’t know where it is.”

"Rubbish!" the old eunuch Hai said, "How come you don't know where the medicine box is?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "I ... I killed someone ... I am very afraid. You ... Gong-gong ... is also going blind. I ... I am completely confused." Speaking to this point, unexpectedly he broke into a loud bawling. He did not know where the medicine box was, and was afraid that based on this fact alone he would give himself away, thereupon he cried as soon as he spoke, which, for him, was not difficult at all.

"Ay, this child," the old eunuch Hai said, "What's so frightening about killing people? The medicine box is inside the first chest."

Sobbing and sniffling, Wei Xiaobao said, "Yes ... yes ... I ... I am very scared." He saw both chests were locked with copper padlocks, and he did not know where the key was. Reaching out to the lock, he tried to pull it, and the padlock immediately

opened. Turned out it was not locked at all. "I am in luck!" he cheered inwardly, "If I did not know the trick of this padlock, the old turtle would be greatly suspicious." Setting the lock aside, he opened the chest and saw that it contained mostly clothes. On the left there was a medicine box like the one used by the doctors. He picked it up immediately and took it outside.

The old eunuch Hai said, "Take some 'Corpse Transforming Powder' to melt the body."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied, pulling the small drawers of the box one by one. He saw the drawers were full of porcelain bottles of all colors, shapes and sizes, no two bottles were alike. He did not know which one was the 'Corpse Transforming Powder', so he asked, "Which bottle?"

"This kid," the old eunuch Hai said, "How come you are confused about everything today? Are you really frightened that you lost your head?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "I ... I'm scared. Gong-gong, your eyes ... can ... can they get well?" His voice sounded full of concern over the old eunuch Hai's eyes, truly it was incomparably earnest.

The old eunuch Hai seemed to be quite moved; he reached out and gently caressed Wei Xiaobao's head. He said, "It's the triangular bottle, greenish-blue in color, with white dot on it. This powder is very precious, only a tiny bit is enough."

"Yes, yes!" Wei Xiaobao replied. Picking up the greenish-blue with white dot bottle, he pulled the cork, picked a sheet of white paper from the medicine box, and poured a little bit of powder out, and then scattered it onto Xiao Guizi's body. But half a day later, nothing happened.

"What is it?" the old eunuch Hai asked.

"I don't see anything," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"Did you scatter it on the blood?" the old eunuch Hai asked.

"Ah, I forgot!" Wei Xiaobao exclaimed. He took some more powder and sprinkled it on the corpse's wound.

"Something's really weird with you today," the old eunuch Hai said, "Even your voice is greatly different."

Right this moment, they heard the wound on Xiao Guizi's corpse started to sizzle, a thin smoke appeared, followed by yellowish liquid flowing out from the wound. The smoke was getting thicker, the yellow liquid also flowed more and more, producing a very strong acid stench. The corpse's wound decomposed bigger and bigger. As the flesh made contact with the yellow liquid, it emitted smoke and slowly turned into liquid. Even the clothes were turning into liquid.

Wei Xiaobao watched with his tongue stuck out; he took his old clothes and threw it onto the corpse. Seeing his own shoes were torn at the toes, he hastily pulled Xiao Guizi's shoes and put them on his feet, and then threw the worn-out shoes onto the yellow liquid. Approximately two hours later, Xiao Guizi's body, including his clothes and Wei Xiaobao's shoes and socks, everything disappeared; only a pool of yellow liquid was left on the floor.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "If the old turtle pass out now, nothing can be better. I'll put poisonous liquid into him, then a moment later he would melt that even his skeletons would not remain." But the old eunuch Hai did not stop coughing, did not stop sighing, without any sign that he would pass out anytime soon.

He saw the paper panes on the window gradually turned brighter, it was already dawn. Wei Xiaobao thought, "I have changed clothes, I can simply go out in grandiose, nobody will recognize me, I have nothing to worry about."

"Xiao Guizi," the old eunuch Hai suddenly said, "It is dawn, isn't it?"

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said.

The old eunuch Hai said, "Fetch some water and mop the liquid on the floor clean, this odor is nasty." Wei Xiaobao complied; he returned to the inner room and fetched several ladles of water from the water tub and flushed the liquid on the floor.

The old eunuch Hai also said, "After breakfast, you may go gambling with them."

Wei Xiaobao thought it was very strange, he expected the old eunuch Hai was joking; thereupon he said, "Gambling? I am not going! Your eyes are not well, how can I go alone and play?"

The old eunuch Hai angrily said, "Who said anything about playing? I have taught you for the last several months, you have lost several hundred *taels*, coming and going, everything is for this great cause; aren't you going to obey me anymore?"

Wei Xiaobao did not understand his intention, he had no alternative but to mumble his response, "No … it's not that I don't want to obey you, but you are not well, your coughing is so severe. I do care about … about this cause, but nobody is taking care of you."

"You are helping me in this matter, it is better than anything else," the old eunuch Hai said, "Try throwing it again."

"Throw it again, throw ... throw what?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Go get the dice!" the old eunuch Hai angrily said, "Always decline with all sorts of excuses. Not willing to make an effort to practice. Has learned for a long time, has never made any progress."

Hearing it was 'throwing the dice', Wei Xiaobao was shaken inwardly. In Yangzhou, other than listening to stories, he spent most of his time throwing dice with other people. Although he was young, in the streets and alleys of Yangzhou, he could

already be considered an expert. It was just that he did not know where the dice was kept, therefore, he said, "This day made my head spins, I don't know where those dice are kept."

"Useless creature," the old eunuch Hai cursed, "Hearing the words 'throwing dice' you get scared out of your wits. The money you lose is not yours anyway. Aren't those dice nicely kept in the chest?"

"I don't know," Wei Xiaobao replied. He went back into the inner room and flipped around in the chest. In a brocade box he indeed saw a small china bowl, in the bowl were six dice. It was as if he had met an old friend far from home; he could not refrain from cheering. Picking up the six dice, he cheered again. Turned out, not only he met an old friend, he met a very close old friend. As soon as he held the six dice, he immediately knew that the dice were cheating dice; they were filled with mercury.

Bringing the bowl and the dice to the old eunuch Hai he said, "Are you sure you want me to go gambling? You will be alone in here with nobody taking care of you, is that alright?"

"Just cut the crap," the old eunuch Hai said, "Let's see if within ten throws, you can give me one 'Heaven'."

In those days, gamblers could use either four or six dice. If six dice were used, four of the dice must show the same number of dots, with the remaining two dice became dominoes. Two 'sixes' was 'Heaven', two 'ones' was 'Earth', otherwise the winner was determined by the number of the dots, large or small.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "These dice are loaded with mercury, you want me to throw ten times to get one 'Heaven', you are belittling *laozi* too much." But cheating with dice loaded with mercury is a lot more difficult than using dice loaded with lead. He threw four, five times and failed to get the desired numbers. By the sixth throw, he got two 'sixes', three 'threes', and one 'four'. If this 'four' were 'three', then he would have gotten a

'Heaven'. With the tip of his pinkie he pushed lightly and the 'four' turned into 'three'. He clapped and exclaimed, "Good! Good! Isn't this a 'Heaven'?"

"Don't cheat on me just because I cannot see," the old eunuch Hai said, "Bring it here, let me feel it." He ran his finger inside the bowl and sure enough, out of six dice, four were 'threes', two were 'sixes'. "Your luck is good today," he said, "Now give me a 'Plum Blossom'."

Wei Xiaobao lifted the dice, and was about to throw when suddenly a thought occurred to him: "From the way he speaks, that little turtle Xiao Guizi's skill in throwing dice was extremely lacking. If I can throw whatever I want, I will definitely raise this old turtle's suspicion." Thereupon he shifted the strength of his hand and successively threw seven, eight times without the desired result. After the next throw, he heaved a sigh.

"What did you throw?" the old eunuch Hai asked.

"It's ... it's ... " Wei Xiaobao stammered.

"Humph," the old eunuch Hai snorted, he reached out to the bowl and felt four 'twos', one 'four' and one 'five', which made it a 'nine'. "Reduce your hand's strength a little bit," he said, "Your 'Plum Blossom' turned into a 'nine'. But a 'nine' is not bad either. Try again."

Wei Xiaobao threw seventeen, eighteen times. He got one 'long three', which was only a level below 'Plum Blossom'. After running his fingers on the dice, the old eunuch Hai was quite happy; "You are making some progress," he said, "Now go and try your luck. Today you may take fifty … fifty *taels*."

When he was looking for the dice earlier, Wei Xiaobao had already seen a dozen or so *yuanbiao*. Speaking of gambling, it was his most favorite activity; it’s just that first, he did not have the capital, second, he loved to cheat too much, within the marketplace of Yangzhou, he was known as the little swindler,

other than out-of-town people, nobody was willing to gamble with him. This time from the state of panic he suddenly could go gambling, not only that, he even had fifty *taels* gambling capital; not even in his wildest dream he would imagine he could enjoy an unrestrained gambling like this. Moreover, he had the loaded dice in his hand; truly it was hell turning into heaven. Even if he were to be beheaded after gambling, he would not be willing to escape. Only he did not know who the opponent was, or when he was supposed to go gambling. If he asked every detail, he would definitely give himself away. Currently, these were his greatest concerns.

He opened the chest and took two *yuanbao*, each worth twenty five *taels*. While he was still busy thinking of a way to extract the information from the Old eunuch Hai, suddenly he heard someone outside the door loudly calling, “Xiao Guizi, Xiao Guizi!”

Wei Xiaobao walked out into the outer hall and called back. In low voice Old eunuch Hai said, “They are here to get you, just go.” Wei Xiaobao was about to go out happily when suddenly he came to this realization: “These gambling ghosts are not blind, as soon as they see me, they will know I am not Xiao Guizi. What should I do?” He heard the person outside was calling again, “Xiao Guizi, come out! I want to talk to you.”

“Coming!” Wei Xiaobao replied. He returned to the inner room at once and took a piece of white cloth, which he wrapped around his head and face, leaving only his eyes and mouth exposed. “I am leaving!” he told Old eunuch Hai, and walked out the door quickly. He saw outside the door there was a thirty-something man, who asked him in low voice, “What happened to you?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Lost some money, Gong-gong beat my eyes blue and my nose swollen.”

The man chuckled; he did not suspect anything. In low voice

he asked again, “Do you dare to win your money back?”

Wei Xiaobao pulled his sleeve and took him several steps farther, and then also with a low voice he said, “Don’t let Gong-gong hear it; of course I want to win my money back.”

The man raised his thumb and said, “Good boy, you have guts. Let’s go!”

Wei Xiaobao walked alongside the man. He noticed the man had a small head and pointy forehead, his complexion looked greenish white. After walking several *zhang* the man said, “The two Wen brothers and Ping Wei are already there. Your luck may be good today.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “If I don’t win today, that … that will be really bad!”

They walked along winding corridors, passing through courtyards and gardens . “Damn it,” Wei Xiaobao mused, “The owner is really rich, this is such a big house.” He saw the hanging eaves were brightly painted, the ridgepoles and beams were carved with decorative patterns. In all his life, he had never seen such a rich, beautiful and luxurious big house like this. He thought, “Our Lovely Spring Courtyard in Yangzhou can be considered the most beautiful, or at least the second most beautiful, large courtyard, but compared to this place it falls too short. If managed well, we can open a courtyard in here, the brothel patrons will be very happy. It's just that a courtyard this big, if not filled with hundreds of young ladies, it may look unseemly."

Wei Xiaobao followed the man for quite some time before they finally entered a side room of a building. Passing through two rooms, the man knocked at the door. 'Knock, knock, knock' three times, 'knock knock' twice, then 'knock, knock, knock' three times again. The door creaked open, he heard 'ding ling ling', 'ding ling ling', the rattling of dice in the bowl; it was such

an unspeakable music to Wei Xiaobao's ears.

Inside the room there were five, six people, all dressed in similar outfits, their attention was focused on the dice. A twenty-something man asked, "What happened to Xiao Guizi?"

The man who brought Wei Xiaobao in replied with a laugh, "Lost some money, got beaten by Hai *Laogong*."

"Heh, heh ..." the man laughed while clucking his tongue.

Standing behind these men, Wei Xiaobao saw they were placing their bets. Some put down one *tael*, some other five *taels*, they all used bamboo stick as the bargaining chips. One man said, "Xiao Guizi, how much stolen money are you going to lose today?"

"Pei!" Wei Xiaobao spat, "What do you mean 'stolen money'? 'Win' or 'lose'? So unpleasant to hear!" Actually, he had wanted to shoot curses like 'son of turtles' and 'son of a bitch', but he realized his accent greatly differed than theirs; if he swear too much, he would only give himself away, so he thought the less he speak the better, while at the same time trying to learn their accent.

The man who take him in picked some chips, he looked somewhat uncertain. Another man by his side said, "Lao Wu [Ol' Wu], the banker is rotten, bet a bit more."

"Alright!" Lao Wu said. He put down two *taels.* "Xiao Guizi," he said, "What about you?"

Wei Xiaobao thought, "I must not let them pay too much attention to me; I must not win too much, I must not lose too much, I must not bet too much either." Thereupon he put down five *qian.* Nobody paid him any attention.

The man acting as the banker was a fat man, whom everybody called Ping *Dage*. Wei Xiaobao remembered Lao Wu mentioned the name Ping Wei as one of the gamblers, so this

Ping *Dage* must be Ping Wei. He saw Ping Wei was picking up the dice and shaking them in his palm; "Last bets!" he shouted, and tossed the dice into the bowl. Wei Xiaobao attentively watched his hand movement, and immediately felt relieved. "This man is a cattle [orig. 'yang gu' (羊牯) - sheep and bullock/cow]," he thought. In his book, a gambler who cannot cheat was a 'cattle'.

Ping Wei threw six dice, and got an 'ox head', which was the weak side of 'large'. Subsequently one by one they all threw the dice; some won, some lost. Lao Wu threw an 'eight', so he lost. Each time he saw someone throw the dice, Wei Xiaobao would cry out in his heart, "Cattle!" And so he cried out "Cattle" seven times in a row; instantly he was very relieved.

Wei Xiaobao had planned to use the old eunuch Hai's mercury-loaded dice in his pocket halfway through the game; he would switch the dice and after winning some money he would try to switch again. Throwing loaded dice involved an extremely-difficult-to-train technique, switching it also required sharp eyes and quick hands, very much like performing magic tricks. First he must divert other people's attention, such as suddenly kicking a stool, spilling a cup of tea, and so on. When people's eyes were on the stool or the tea cup, then the real and fake dice were switched. For a real expert, however, there is no need for any inferior trick like kicking stool or spilling tea, usually the expert would conceal the six dice on his wrist, as the fingers grab the dice and throw, the dice fallen into the bowl would be the ones concealed on his wrist, while the six dice among his fingers would switch into his left palm. The gods were unaware, the ghosts did not realize, the real dice would go into his pocket. But Wei Xiaobao had not mastered this skill yet.

There is a saying, 'Dice loaded with lead, to win money is not difficult; dice loaded with mercury, touching iron will turn it into gold'. Both mercury and lead are heavy, one side of the dice

would be light, the other side would be heavy, so the dice would be steered at will. However, lead is a solid, while mercury is constantly flowing, therefore, throwing lead-loaded dice is easy, throwing mercury-loaded dice is extremely difficult. Lead-loaded dice is easy to detect; beside, if you can throw a large number, the opponent can also throw a large number. But if the dice were loaded with mercury, the desired number cannot be achieved without excellent technique; a common cheater would not be able to perform this trick.

Wei Xiaobao had about 60-70% confidence in throwing dice loaded with lead, but only about 10 or 20% confidence throwing dice loaded with mercury. Although his confidence was only 10-20%, in ten throws he only need to win once or twice, within several hours of playing, he would definitely win big. A real first-class master would be able to throw ordinary dice and get whatever number his belly desired, without fail; there is no need to load the dice with lead or mercury. However, this kind of master may not necessarily exist one in ten thousand. Wei Xiaobao had never seen this kind of master. Even if he had, he might not necessarily be able to tell.

Seeing his opponents were all 'cattle', Wei Xiaobao thought switching the dice would be completely safe, so there was no need to hurry. When he started, he had two *yuanbiao* worth twenty-five *taels* each; he exchanged one for bargaining chips, and now he put the other one on his left, with the intention of using it as diversion when he switch the dice later. He also thought, "Since Xiao Guizi often lost money, I'd better lose first and win later, to avoid drawing people's suspicion." Throwing several times, he only got a measly 'six', naturally he lost.

In this way he lost some, won some, but he kept playing, until he lost five *taels* of silver. After gambling for half a day, the stake was growing higher and higher, but Wei Xiaobao kept his bet at five *qian.* Banker Ping Wei refused to take his bamboo

stick, "At least one *tael*," he said, "Five *qian* is not accepted." Wei Xiaobao immediately added another bargaining chip. The banker threw a ‘Man’, and thus ate down the others’ bets.

Wei Xiaobao was angry the banker was not willing to take his bet, this time he was determined to win. He mused, “You don’t want to take my five *qian* and insist on I lose one *tael*. Good chap, you have guts, your scheming is exquisite. If I beat you with a ‘Heaven’, I am not a hero.” With his left hand he grabbed the dice, his left elbow stuck out, and bumped the big *yuanbao* that it fell down. ‘Thud’ it landed on his left foot. “Aiyo! It hurts!” he screamed loudly, while jumping up and down.

His fellow gamblers roared in loud laughter and watched him stooping down to pick the *yuanbao*. Wei Xiaobao lightly and easily switched the dice, which he promptly threw. Four dice had three dots, two dice had one dot; it was an ‘Earth’, which happened to be a notch above the ‘Man’.

“Damn it!” Ping Wei cursed, “Little demon is lucky today!”

Wei Xiaobao was startled, "Not right!" he thought, "if I win this way and the others start paying attention, they will know I am not Xiao Guizi." So the next time he threw, he lost a *tael*. Right away everyone started to raise their stake, some put down three *taels*, some two *taels*, while Wei Xiaobao himself put down two *taels*, and won two *taels*. The next time he lost one *tael*.

Gambling all the way thru noon, Wei Xiaobao accumulated twenty *taels,* only each bet was very small, so nobody paid any attention. Lao Wu had lost his entire capital of thirty *taels*, and was looking very dejected. Spreading out his hands he said, "Today my luck is not good, I quit!"

When Wei Xiaobao gambles, nine times out of ten he would always cheat, yet toward his fellow gamblers he was exceedingly forthright. Normally people threw insults at him and

beat him, nobody has had any regard of him; yet when there was someone who lost everything, he would lend money to that person. Of course the person would be grateful, and would see him with special fondness. In all his life, Wei Xiaobao has had several opportunities to be a hero by loaning gambling capital to people like this. Even if the person did not pay him back, he did not really care. Putting things back in order, he realized that the money was not his to begin with.

This time, seeing Lao Wu had lost everything and was about to walk away, he grabbed some bargaining chips, worth about seventeen, eighteen *taels,* which he stuffed into Lao Wu's hand and said, "Take this to recover your capital, pay me back when you win!"

Lao Wu was ecstatic at this turn of events. Gamblers had never be willing to lend money to others; first, they were afraid the lenders would not pay it back, second, they thought that as the money leaves their hands, their good luck will turn into a bad one, their initial win might turn into loses. Seeing Wei Xiaobao to be so generous, he was greatly delighted. Repeatedly patting Wei Xiaobao's shoulder, he praised, "Good *Xiongdi*, you are a real friend."

The banker Ping Wei was in a winning-streak; he was most afraid people lose their all and leave the game, thereupon he was also full of praise over Wei Xiaobao's 'magnanimous act'. He said, "Ha, Xiao Guizi has turned his way, you are not so stingy today!"

The game continued, Wei Xiaobao won another six, seven *taels*; suddenly someone said, "Lunch time, we will continue playing tomorrow."

As they heard the words 'lunch time', everybody stopped immediately and hurriedly exchanged their bargaining chips into money. Wei Xiaobao did not have enough time to switch the mercury-loaded dice back, but thinking that these 'cattle' would

not be able to see through it anyway, he set his heart at ease.

Wei Xiaobao followed Lao Wu out, thinking, "I wonder where the lunch is being served?"

Out of more than a dozen *taels* he borrowed, Lao Wu had lost almost all; he said, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, I will have to pay you back tomorrow."

"We are brothers," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Why so strict?"

"Heh heh," Lao Wu laughed, "You are such a good brother. Hurry on back, Hai *Laogong* is waiting for you for lunch."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied; he mused, "Turns out I'll have to eat with the old turtle. If I don't make my getaway now, what am I waiting for?" Seeing Lao Wu enter a hall, he considered, "There are halls, gardens and corridors in here, I wonder where the main gate is?" Without any choice he simply walked blindly; oftentimes he came across people who dressed like himself, but he did not dare to ask where the main gate was.

He walked farther and farther away, gradually his heart began to panic, "I'd better return to old turtle Hai's place first." But by now he had already lost even the way back to the old eunuch Hai's place, he was at places he had never been before. Oftentimes he saw a horizontal inscribed board above the hall or above the door, but since he did not know any characters, he did not bother to look.

Walking a moment longer, he did not even see anybody else. His belly was growling from hunger. Passing a moon gate, he saw a building on the left with an unlatched door. Passing by the door, a whiff of food aroma suddenly assaulted his nostrils; he could not refrain himself from drooling. Pushing the door lightly, he poked his head inside.

He saw a dozen or so dishes of light refreshments, cakes and pastries spread on a table. Seeing there was nobody inside, he tiptoed in, picked a piece of 'thousand-layer' cake, and put it in

his mouth. Several chews later, he could not help but secretly praised. This thousand-layer cake was made of layers of flour, honey, sugar and lard, flavored with osmanthus flower's fragrance; it was light and sweet.

Weiyang district of Yangzhou city was renowned for its light refreshments in the whole China; to entertain their patrons, the brothels always had the light refreshments exquisitely made. Wei Xiaobao frequently preceded the patrons to have a taste of the snacks; despite the beating and scolding from the old procuress and mistresses, he still stole the foods without any care. This time eating the cake, it was obvious that the quality of the light refreshments here was much finer than the ones in the brothels. He thought, "This thousand-layer cake is made really well; I think I am most likely at the number one brothel in Beijing."

Finished with the piece of thousand-layer cake, he still did not hear anybody coming, so he picked a *shumai*[39] and stuffed it into his mouth. He had a vast experience in stealing food; he knew he must not take too much from a plate or a dish, only then it would not be easily detected. After having eaten the *shumai*, he took a piece of pea-flour cake; taking care to rearrange the cakes and pastries in the dish to remove any sign that it had been stolen.

While he was still eating, suddenly he heard the sound of boots outside the door, someone was coming; hastily he picked a mince meat cake coated with sesame seed. He saw the room was bare; there were several human shapes cut out of cowhide hanging on the wall, and several large cloth sacks hanging from the beam, presumably filled with rice, wheat or perhaps some sandy soil. Other than those, there was only this table, with a piece of table cloth hanging in front of it. Almost without thinking he crawled underneath the table.

Chapter 4

Stealthily seeking the antelope hanging its antlers, forgetting the opportunity to resist the crane combing its plume.

(Translated by Foxs)

As Wei Xiaobao pounced forward, Xiao Xuanzi sidestepped, while stretching out his hand to push Wei Xiaobao's back. Wei Xiaobao pounced on an empty air. His own momentum plus Xiao Xuanzi's push had sent him crashing heavily on the ground.

The person walked in. From underneath the table Wei Xiaobao

peeked, he saw the boots were not big, so the incoming person must be a boy about the same age as himself, instantly he was relieved. He put the sesame coated cake in his mouth, but he did not dare to chew, he just used his saliva to slowly soak the cake and then when it was soft enough he swallowed it. He heard the sound of munching next to the table, the boy was eating the cake and pastry. Wei Xiaobao thought, “Another food thief. I’ll jump out and scream, this little demon will certainly be frightened and run away, then I can enjoy my food in peace.” He also thought, “I was so stupid, I should’ve put those light refreshments in my pocket and leave. This is not Lovely Spring Courtyard, they will not miss anything, surely they won’t make me responsible for it?”

Suddenly he heard some ‘bang, bang’ noise, the boy was pounding something. Wei Xiaobao’s curiosity was piqued, he craned his neck to look around, and saw the boy, approximately fourteen or fifteen years old, wearing short gown, was punching the sack hanging from the beam. After punching the sack for a while, he turned his attention to the cowhide dummy hanging on the wall and started to attack. The boy punch the pit of the dummy’s stomach, followed by reaching out with both arms to grab the dummy’s waist and pressed it to the floor. The technique the boy used was similar to the Manchurian wrestling technique he saw at the wine shop the previous day.

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and jumped out from underneath the table; he said, “Dummy is dead, what so fun about it? I am here to play with you.”

Seeing Wei Xiaobao suddenly appear with his face wrapped in white cloth, the boy was slightly startled, but hearing that he was here to accompany him playing, immediately his face showed a happy expression. “Good,” he said, “Bring it on!” Wei Xiaobao pounced forward, trying to twist the boy’s arm. The boy sidestepped and tripped with his right foot. Wei Xiaobao

staggered and fell to the ground.

"Pei," the boy spat, "You don't even know wrestling."

"Says who?" Wei Xiaobao replied. He leaped back up and grabbed the boy's left leg. The body reached down to grab his back, but Wei Xiaobao dodged, the boy caught an empty air. Wei Xiaobao recalled the technique Mao Shiba used to deal with the seven Manchurians at the wine shop; suddenly he threw a punch with his left hand toward the boy's lower jaw. 'Bang!' it hit the target. The boy was startled, his eyes revealed an angry look. Wei Xiaobao laughed. "Pei," he spat, "You don't even know wrestling."

The boy did not say anything; his hand made a feign move, Wei Xiaobao leaned sideways to evade, the boy suddenly sent out his elbow and hit Wei Xiaobao's waist. Wei Xiaobao cried out in pain and doubled over. From behind the boy slipped both arms underneath Wei Xiaobao's armpits and hooked them up; ten fingers grasped each other behind his neck, forcing Wei Xiaobao down lower and lower. Wei Xiaobao kicked backwards with his left foot. The boy abruptly pushed with both hands, flinging Wei Xiaobao out, 'bang!' he fell face down like a dog eating dung.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly angered, he rolled over and grabbed the boy's legs with all his might and pulled him down as hard as he could. The boy could not withstand and fell down; he happened to fall on top of Wei Xiaobao's body. The boy was comparably bigger and taller than Wei Xiaobao. Right away he used his elbow to press down the back of Wei Xiaobao's neck. Wei Xiaobao could not breathe, he struggled to stand up with everything he had. After a bit of struggling, he finally succeeded to be on top and now he pressed down on the boy's body. However, Wei Xiaobao was small, his body was light, he was unable to press for long; soon the boy was back on top again.

Wei Xiaobao was very slippery, releasing the boy's legs, he

slipped to his back, and fiercely kicked the boy's butts. The boy reached backward to grab Wei Xiaobao's right leg and pulled it hard; Wei Xiaobao fell face up. The body pounced and clutched Wei Xiaobao's neck with both hands. "Surrender?" he shouted.

Wei Xiaobao hooked his left foot around the boy's waist, but because the boy's clothes were slippery, his foot was rubbing the boy's waist. The boy was ticklish and he giggled, his hands loosened. Wei Xiaobao seized this opportunity to leap up and grabbed the boy's neck. The boy used a wrestling technique to seize the back of Wei Xiaobao's neck and threw him heavily on the floor. Wei Xiaobao was dizzy and was unable to move a single step. The boy laughed aloud and asked, "Surrender?"

Wei Xiaobao suddenly leaped up and rammed his head against the opponent's lower abdomen. "Humph!" the boy grunted and staggered several steps backwards. Wei Xiaobao lunged forward, the boy leaned slightly to the side, and swept his leg across. Wei Xiaobao fell down, but managed to grab onto the boy's thigh with all his life. Both of them tumbled down together.

Sometimes the boy was on top, sometimes Wei Xiaobao was on top; after rolling around for seventeen, eighteen times, finally the two of them were grabbing each other, both were gasping for breath. Suddenly, as if by prior agreement, both of them broke out in laughter, since both thought that this kind of wrestling was very fun; then slowly they let their hands go.

The boy reached out to tear the cloth wrapped around Wei Xiaobao's face; he laughed and said, "What do you wrap your head for?"

Wei Xiaobao was startled; he was about to reach out and snatch it back, but then he thought the boy had seen most of his face anyway, so trying to conceal it again would be useless. He laughed and said, "I wrapped my face, so that when I come and steal the food, nobody would recognize me."

The boy stood up and said with a laugh, “Alright, turns out you often come here and steal the food.”

“Not often,” Wei Xiaobao said, while also standing up. He saw the boy’s face had delicate features and a lofty expression, so Wei Xiaobao had a favorable impression on him.

The boy asked, “What’s your name?”

“Xiao Guizi,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “And you?”

The boy hesitated for a moment, then said, “I am … I am Xiao Xuanzi[40]. Which Gong-gong do you work for?”

“I am with Hai *Laogong*,” Wei Xiaobao replied.

Xiao Xuanzi nodded. He used Wei Xiaobao’s wrapping cloth to wipe the sweat from his forehead; picking up another piece of light refreshment, he started eating again. Wei Xiaobao did not want to be outdone, he thought ‘you dare to steal the food, my courage is not inferior to yours’; thereupon he picked up another piece of thousand-layer cake and without the slightest care put it into his mouth.

Xiao Xuanzi chuckled and said, “You haven’t learned wrestling, but your hands and feet are very nimble, surprisingly I am not able to hold you down for a long time. If we fight a bit longer, you will definitely lose.”

“That’s not necessarily true,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Let’s try again.”

“Very good,” Xiao Xuanzi said. The two of them started to wrestle again.

Xiao Xuanzi seemed to know some wrestling techniques, plus he was older and stronger than Wei Xiaobao. However, Wei Xiaobao had fought hundreds of fights at Yangzhou marketplace, he had survived countless scuffles against big thugs and little rascals, his ‘battle’ experience was far richer

than Xiao Xuanzi. Yet in the end he remembered Mao Shiba's lecture, plus his wrestling against Xiao Xuanzi was just a game, not a life-and-death fight; and thus he did not resort to the stunts that he was famous of, such as finger twisting, braid pulling, throat biting, eyeball poking, ear pulling, scrotum pinching, and so on. As a result, it was more difficult for him to score a victory.

After wrestling for a while, Wei Xiaobao was pinned down with Xiao Xuanzi riding on his back without he was able to stand up. Xiao Xuanzi laughed and said, "Surrender now?"

"I won't surrender even to the death," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Xiao Xuanzi laughed aloud and jumped up from Wei Xiaobao's back. Wei Xiaobao leaped up and pounced on him again, but Xiao Xuanzi shook his hand and said with a laugh, "No more fighting today, we'll do it again tomorrow. But you are not my match, fighting again will be useless."

Wei Xiaobao refused to give in, he fished his pocket for an ingot, weighed approximately three *taels*, he said, "Tomorrow we'll fight again, but for money. You must also bring three *taels*."

Xiao Xuanzi was taken aback, he said, "Alright, we'll fight for a prize. Tomorrow I will bring my stake here. Midday, we'll fight again in here."

Wei Xiaobao said, "We have a dead appointment, don't leave before we meet. A real man gave his words, … some horses cannot pull it back." For some reason, he could never remember the 'four-horse team' part of this saying, so he could only mumble that part.

Xiao Xuanzi laughed aloud and said, "That's right, a real man gave his words, … some horses cannot pull it back." While saying that, he walked out the room.

Wei Xiaobao grabbed a handful of light refreshments and put

it in his pocket, and then he also left. He remembered Mao Shiba who was having a martial art duel appointment, even though he was in prison, he must escape from prison to keep the appointment. Although he was seriously injured, he still vowed to keep his promises, waiting for the two experts at the foot of the Victory Hill. This kind of spirit had won others' true admiration. Many times he had heard the storytellers told about heroes, oftentimes he would fantasize himself were a big hero, a real warrior, who was having duel appointment with others, wasn't it his chance has come now?

Thinking that tomorrow he must come, tonight he must return to Hai Laogong's residence. Thereupon he retraced his path, slowly looking for the building he had been gambling earlier. Since previously he had taken a right turn, which had led him farther and farther away, this time he took the left turn. Walking past two winding corridors, he vaguely remembered the gardens and the courtyards he had seen before. By looking for familiar landscape, eventually he reached Hai Laogong's residence.

As he walked through the door, he heard the sound of Hai Laogong's coughing. "Gong-gong," he called out, "Are you feeling better?"

"Better your fart!" Hai Laogong's gloom voice replied, "Get in, quick!"

Wei Xiaobao walked into the room and saw Hai Laogong was sitting on a chair. The broken table had been replaced with a new one. Hai Laogong asked, "How much did you win?"

"I won more than ten *taels*," Wei Xiaobao replied, "But … but …"

"But what?" Hai Laogong asked.

"But I lent it to Lao Wu," Wei Xiaobao said. Actually, he won more than twenty *taels*, other than what he loaned Lao Wu, he

still had eight or nine *taels*, but because he was afraid Hai Laogong would ask him to hand it over, when Hai Laogong asked the account, he unavoidably did not tell the truth.

Hai Laogong's countenance sank, he said, "What good it is to lend money to that kid Lao Wu? He does not even work for the Upper Study Room. Why didn't you lend it to the two Wen brothers?"

Wei Xiaobao was unclear of the reason, he said, "The Wen brothers did not ask for a loan."

Hai Laogong said, "Didn't ask you for a loan, can't you think of a way so that they would? Don't tell me you have forgotten everything I told you?"

"I … I killed that boy last night," Wei Xiaobao said, "I am so scared that I have forgotten everything. Must loan money to the Wen brothers, right, right, you, Senior, did instruct me to do that."

"Humph," Hai Laogong said, "What's so great about killing one or two people? But you are still young, you have never killed anybody before, I can't blame you. That book, you haven't forgotten about it, have you?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "That book … book … I … I …"

Hai Laogong snorted again, he said, "So you really have forgotten everything?"

"Gong-gong, I …" Wei Xiaobao said, "I have a terrible headache, I … I am very scared, you are coughing like that, I am really worried, everything … everything is muddled in my head."

"Alright, come here!" Hai Laogong said.

"Yes!" Wei Xiaobao replied, as he walked several steps closer.

Hai Laogong said, "Let me tell you again, if you don't

remember it this time, I am going to kill you."

"Yes, yes," Wei Xiaobao said, thinking, "If you tell me all the way through, I won't forget it for a hundred years."

Hai Laogong said, "Win the Wen brothers' money, when they are out of money, you give them loan, the more the better. After a few days, you then want them to take you to the Upper Study Room. They owe you money, they won't dare not to comply. If they give you all sorts of excuses, tell them that I will settle the account with the Upper Study Room manager, Wu Laogong. If the Wen brothers still do not want to pay, we may have to bring this to the Emperor's attention …"

"The Emperor?" Wei Xiaobao said.

"What is it?" Hai Laogong asked.

"No … nothing," Wei Xiaobao said.

Hai Laogong continued, "They may ask you what do you want in the Upper Study Room. You tell them that people are bound to go to higher place, you wish to see the Emperor by doing some errand at the Upper Study Room. Of course the Wen brothers won't let you see the Emperor, when they take you there, certainly the Emperor won't be in the Upper Study Room. That's when you will try to steal a book."

Hearing him kept mentioning of the Emperor, Wei Xiaobao's heart was stirred, "Could it be that this is the Imperial Palace? And not Beijing's biggest brothel? Aiyo hey, that's right, that's right, if this is not the Imperial Palace, how could there be such splendor and majesty? These people must be court eunuchs attending the Emperor."

Although Wei Xiaobao had heard people mentioning the Emperor, Empress, Crown Prince, Princess, as well as palace maids and court eunuch, he only knew that the Emperor are supposed to wear dragon robe, but how the Emperor actually look like, he had no idea. In Yangzhou he had watched a lot of

plays, but the court eunuchs in those plays did not dress like Hai Laogong, Lao Wu or the others at all, the actors' hands always held a whisk, which they waved here and there. The songs in the play were not pleasant to hear. He had contact with Hai Laogong only for a day, he had gambled with Lao Wu, the Wen brothers and the others for half a day, but he did not know they were eunuchs. This time hearing Hai Laogong's words, he gradually understood; he thought, "Aiyo, in this case, haven't I turned into a court eunuch?"

In stern voice Hai Laogong said, "Have you understood clearly what you heard?"

"Yes, yes, very clear," Wei Xiaobao said, "I have to go to the Em … Emperor's Upper Study Room."

"To the Emperor's Upper Study Room for what?" Hai Laogong said, "To play?"

"To steal a book," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"Steal what book?" Hai Laogong asked.

"This … this … some book … I … I can't remember," Wei Xiaobao stammered.

Hai Laogong said, "I'll tell you one more time, remember it well. It is a Buddhist scripture, called 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'. This book will look very old, there are several copies, I want you to bring them all to me. Do you remember? What's the book called?"

"It is called the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'," Wei Xiaobao happily replied.

Hai Laogong detected the happiness in his voice, he asked, "Why are you happy?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "As soon as you mentioned it, I then recalled it to mind, therefore I am happy."

Actually, when he heard that Hai Laogong wanted him to steal a book in the Upper Study Room, the ‘stealing’ part was absolutely not difficult, but the ‘book’ part was actually the real problem for him. He did not know any characters as big as watermelons; wanting him to recognize a book, even if he was beheaded he would be unable to accomplish. As soon as he heard the title of the book to be ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’, he could not restrain his heart from swelling in full bloom. ‘Chapter’ and ‘scripture’ he did not know, but ‘forty-two’ three characters [si shi er], he could recognize. Out of five characters [si shi er zhang jing], unexpectedly he knew three, no wonder he was very pleased with himself.

Hai Laogong added, “If you want to steal book at the Upper Study Room, your movements must be clean and in order; if anybody catch you, even if you have a hundred lives, you won’t be able to keep them.”

“I understand this part well,” Wei Xiaobao said, “If you steal something and are caught, how could you sing and play trick?” A sudden inspiration struck; he said, “In no way would I mention Gong-gong’s name.”

Hai Laogong said, “Mention my name or not, it has nothing to do with this matter.” He coughed several times, and then continued, “You have done well today, unexpectedly you win some money. Did they get suspicious?”

“Hey hey,” Wei Xiaobao laughed, “No, no, how could they get suspicious?” He wanted to toot his horn a little bit, but in the end he restrained himself.

“Don’t be lazy, idling left and right without doing anything,” Hai Laogong said, "You must practice a lot.”

Wei Xiaobao complied and walked into the room, he saw bowls and chopsticks on the table, plus four dishes of meat and vegetables, and one bowl of soup, but nobody had touched

anything. "Gong-gong," he hastily said, "You haven't eaten? Let me get some food for you."

"I am not hungry," Hai Laogong said, "I don't want to eat. You go ahead and eat."

Wei Xiaobao was delighted. Without taking any rice, he picked a red-cooked pork with his fingers and ate. Although the dishes were already cold, as it entered his stomach, he found it was indescribably delicious. "I wonder who sent this meal over," he mused, "I'd better not ask this kind of trivial matter, I just have to open my eyes and slowly I will find out." He also thought, "If this is really the Imperial Palace, then Lao Wu, the Wen brothers, and that Xiao Xuanzi that I'll have to deal with, are all eunuchs. I wonder what do the old Emperor and Empress really look like? I guess I will have to see to know that. When I return to Yangzhou, hey hey, *laozi* can tell it with some air. I wonder if Mao *Dage* can escape from the Imperial Palace? During the gambling nobody mentioned anything about catching anybody, most likely he was able to get out."

After eating, because he was afraid he might raise Hai Laogong suspicion, he took the six dice and 'ding ling ling', he threw them into the bowl continuously. After throwing dice for a moment, his eyelids grew heavier and heavier. He did not sleep at all the previous night, and only now did he finally feel very weary, so in a short while he was already asleep.

He slept until the evening, when a worker eunuch came to deliver their dinner. Wei Xiaobao waited on Hai Laogong as he ate, he also helped him to bed, and then he lay down on the small bed. He thought, "The most important thing tomorrow is the martial art contest with Xiao Xuanzi. It would be best if I can beat him." Closing his eyes, he recalled the technique Mao Shiba used to fight the Manchu wrestlers at the wine shop, but the picture in his mind was fuzzy; he could not help but feel a tinge of regret, "Mao *Dage* wanted to teach me martial art, I

was not willing to learn. If I had learned it along the way, although Xiao Xuanzi is stronger than me, how can he be my match? If tomorrow he manage to sit on me and I am not able to flip over, losing money is nothing, but losing face is a big thing. I, the Little White Dragon Wei Xiaobao, cannot mingle around in Jianghu anymore." Suddenly another thought popped up, "The Manchu warriors are not Mao *Dage*'s match, but Mao *Dage* is not the old turtle's match, why not swindle the old turtle to teach me some skill?" Thereupon he said, "Gong-gong, you want me to go to the Upper Study Room to get the book, but there is a small problem."

"What problem?" Hai Laogong asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "On my way back from gambling today, I met a little ... little eunuch. He stopped me and told me to give him the money. I refused, so we had a duel. He said that if I can beat him, then he would let me go. I fought with him for half a day, that's why ... that's why I was late for lunch."

"And you lost, didn't you?" Hai Laogong said.

Wei Xiaobao said, "He is taller and stronger, a lot stronger than I am. He said he wants to have a duel with me every day. The day I can beat him, that will be the day he won't bother me anymore."

"What's this baby's name?" Hai Laogong asked, "Which building does he belong to?"

"He is called Xiao Xuanzi," Wei Xiaobao replied, "But I don't know which building he belongs to."

Hai Laogong said, "Must be because you won some money, your manner appeared disgusting in the eyes of others; otherwise, why would he look for you?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "I refused to submit to him, I'll look for him again tomorrow. I just don't know if I can beat him."

"Humph," Hai Laogong said, "You want to ask me to teach you martial art. I told you I won't teach you, so I won't teach you. It's useless for you to ask in a roundabout way."

Wei Xiaobao cursed silently, "This old turtle is smart, he won't fall into my trick." He said, "This Xiao Xuanzi also does not know martial art. If I want to beat him, I don't need to learn any martial art; who ask you to teach me? Today clearly I was able to sit on his body, it's just that he is strong, he managed to turn me over. Tomorrow I am going to grab him with all my strength, this fellow may not necessarily be able to turn over like a turtle." For the whole day he had been careful, restraining himself not to speak any vulgar word, but now finally he could not bear not to say one.

Hai Laogong said, "You want to hold him down that he won't turn over, that is easy."

"I also think it won't be difficult," Wei Xiaobao said, "Tomorrow I will grab his shoulder really hard."

"Humph," Hai Laogong snorted, "What good is it to grab his shoulder? Whether he can turn over or not depends on the strength of his back. You must use your knee to press against the acupoint on his lower back. Come here, I'll show you."

Wei Xiaobao rolled down from his bed and leaped toward Hai Laogong's bed. Hai Laogong ran his finger on Wei Xiaobao's lower back, and lightly pressed. Immediately Wei Xiaobao felt his entire body limp and painful, his strength was gone.

"Can you remember it?" Hai Laogong asked.

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Tomorrow I'll give it a try, I just don't know if it will work."

Hai Laogong angrily said, "What do you mean it won't work? That is 'one hundred shots, one hundred hits, ten thousand times tests, ten thousand times effective'." He then put out his hand on either side of Wei Xiaobao's neck, and pressed lightly.

"Ah!" Wei Xiaobao screamed, he felt the pit of his stomach was choked, his breathing could not flow.

Hai Laogong said, "If you pressed hard these two acupoints, he won't have any strength to fight you."

Wei Xiaobao was overjoyed, "That will do," he said, "Tomorrow I might be allowed to defeat him." He had just learned the word 'allow' during the gambling that day. Returning to his own bed, he fantasized that the following day the 'Little White Dragon' Wei Xiaobao would beat Xiao Xuanzi so that he would call 'surrender'; and he felt very proud of himself.

The next day Lao Wu called him up again to gamble. The Wen brothers' names were Wen Youdao and Wen Youfang, and today it was these two brothers' turn to be the banker. Wei Xiaobao used his trick and won more than twenty *taels* from them. The two brothers' luck was quite bad that day, in less than an hour, their fifty *taels* capital was wiped clean. Wei Xiaobao loaned them twenty *taels*, but by quitting time, the Wen brothers also lost these twenty *taels*.

Wei Xiaobao's mind was occupied with his martial art competition against Xiao Xuanzi. As soon as the gambling adjourned, he rushed to that room. He saw the table was still loaded with dishes of light refreshments. He picked several pieces and started munching. Soon he heard the sound of boots. Afraid that the incoming person was not Xiao Xuanzi, he thought it would be better for him to hide underneath the table first. But he heard from outside the door Xiao Xuanzi had already called, "Xiao Guizi, Xiao Guizi!"

Wei Xiaobao leaped to the door and said with a laugh, "Appointment to the death, don’t leave before we meet."

Xiao Xuanzi also laughed, "Ha ha ... Appointment to the death, don’t leave before we meet," he said as he walked in.

Wei Xiaobao noticed that Xiao Xuanzi was wearing a brand

new set of outfit, it looked really gorgeous, so that he could not help but feeling rather jealous. He thought, "Wait till I tear your new clothes, you won't be so cocky!" With a loud shout he pounced on Xiao Xuanzi.

Xiao Xuanzi also shouted, "Good move!" Grabbing Wei Xiaobao's arms, he swept with his left leg. Wei Xiaobao could not withstand it, he tottered several steps and tumbled down on the ground, pulling Xiao Xuanzi along that he also fell.

Wei Xiaobao rolled away and leaped up to sit on Xiao Xuanzi's back. Remembering Hai Laogong's lesson, he stretched his hand to press on the acupoint on Xiao Xuanzi's lower back. However, he had never practiced sealing acupoints before, how could he seal the acupoint simply by grabbing it? His grab missed a little bit, Xiao Xuanzi had already turned around and caught Wei Xiaobao's left arm, which he twisted backward forcefully.

"Aiyo!" Wei Xiaobao screamed, "Have you no shame, twisting my arm like that?"

Xiao Xuanzi laughed and said, "Learning wrestling is precisely learning how to twist others' arm; what do you mean I have no shame?"

Taking advantage while Xiao Xuanzi was still speaking, Wei Xiaobao threw himself as hard as he could toward Xiao Xuanzi's lower back, ramming his head against his back, while sneaking his right hand underneath Xiao Xuanzi's armpit, and flung him upward as hard as he could. Xiao Xuanzi's body flew over Wei Xiaobao's head and 'thump!' he landed on the floor.

Xiao Xuanzi leaped up and said, "So you also know the move 'antelope hanging its antlers'."

Wei Xiaobao had no idea what an 'antelope hanging its antlers' move look like, he simply moved without thinking and succeeded. Feeling proud of himself he said, "This 'antelope hanging its antlers' is nothing, I still have many formidable

moves I haven't used yet."

Xiao Xuanzi happily said, "Nothing better than that; let's fight again."

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "Turns out you have practiced martial art, no wonder I cannot beat you. But you use one move, I learn one move; at most you will throw me down several times, I will be able learn your technique." Seeing Xiao Xuanzi was pouncing at him, he also threw himself forward forcefully. To his surprise, Xiao Xuanzi attack was a feign one. As Wei Xiaobao pounced forward, he had already held his momentum and sidestepped, while stretching out his hand to push Wei Xiaobao's back. Wei Xiaobao pounced on an empty air. 'Bang!' His own momentum plus Xiao Xuanzi's push had sent him crashing heavily on the ground.

Xiao Xuanzi cheered loudly and jumped to ride on Wei Xiaobao's back. "Surrender now?" he asked.

"No!" Wei Xiaobao replied. He was about to straighten his back to stand up, suddenly his waist went numb; the two acupoints on his lower back were pressed by Xiao Xuanzi's fingers. This acupoint sealing technique was exactly the one Hai Laogong taught him the previous night. Although he had learned it, the opponent had beaten him in using it first. Wei Xiaobao struggled several times, but all along he was unable to free himself. "Alright," he had no choice but to call out, "I surrender this time!"

Xiao Xuanzi laughed aloud and let him stand up. Suddenly Wei Xiaobao extended his foot to trip him. Xiao Xuanzi's body tilted sideways, he was about to fall. Wei Xiaobao sent a punch toward his lower back. Xiao Xuanzi grunted in pain and doubled over. From behind Wei Xiaobao pounced with both hands grabbed his neck from two directions. Xiao Xuanzi had a spell of dizziness and fell down on the ground. Wei Xiaobao was delighted, without taking his hands away, he asked, "Surrender

now?"

Xiao Xuanzi grunted; suddenly both of his elbows struck backwards. Wei Xiaobao felt a severe pain that he thought his ribs were about to break. He screamed and fell face up. Xiao Xuanzi turned around and sat on the pit of his stomach. He had just scored another victory, but he was panting heavily and was feeling very tired that he was unable to breath normally. "Do ... do ... do you surrender now?" he asked.

"Surrender your fart!" Wei Xiaobao said, "No ... no ... surrender. A hundred times ... ten ... ten thousand times no surrender. You've just won by chance."

Xiao Xuanzi said, "If you don't surrender, then get up and fight again."

With both hands pushing the floor, Wei Xiaobao wanted to stand up, but the vital acupoint on the pit of his stomach was still being pressed by the opponent, his body was numb and aching that he was unable to exert his strength. After struggling for a long time, he did not have any choice but to surrender one more time.

Xiao Xuanzi stood up, his arms were limp and painful. Wei Xiaobao strived to get up, but his body swaggered; he said, "Tomorrow ... tomorrow we'll fight again, I must ... must make you surrender."

Xiao Xuanzi laughed and said, "Fighting a hundred times more, you will ... will ... will lose. If you have guts, tomorrow we'll fight again."

"I am afraid it's you who don't have guts," Wei Xiaobao said, "Why wouldn't I have guts? Appointment to the death, don’t leave before we meet."

"Alright," Xiao Xuanzi said, "Appointment to the death, don’t leave before we meet."

Both of them were fired up because of the fight, nobody mentioned anything about the money. Since Xiao Xuanzi did not mention it, Wei Xiaobao was glad to pretend that he forget. If he were the victor, he would definitely want his money.

Wei Xiaobao returned to his room and said to Hai Laogong, "Gong-gong, your technique was useless, it was too sloppy and ordinary."

"Humph," Hai Laogong snorted, "Hopeless, you lost again."

Wei Xiaobao said, "If I had used my own technique, granted that although I may not win, I may not necessarily lose either. But your technique is just too useless, all other people already know how to us it, what's so special?"

"He also knows this technique?" Hai Laogong wondered, "Show me."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "You are blind, you want me to show you, can you see it?" But then he had a second thought, "But I don't know if he is really blind or just pretending to be blind, I might as well test him." Immediately both of his elbows struck backward and he said, "He strikes like this and each one of the three-thousand bones in my body was very painful."

Hai Laogong sighed and said, "You told me he strike like that, how can I see it?" He rose up shakily and said, "Try to do what he did."

Wei Xiaobao was secretly delighted, "The old turtle is really blind." With his back against Hai Laogong, he thrust his elbows slowly backwards, and said, "He used his elbows like this to strike me." As soon as his elbow reached Hai Laogong's chest, he no longer exerted any strength.

"Hmm," Hai Laogong said, "This is 'armpit-bottom hammer'; nothing special about it."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Then there is this one." He pulled Hai

Laogong's left hand and placed it on his right shoulder; he said, "He put forth his strength and flung me, my body then flew over his head." Actually, it was he who flung Xiao Xuanzi, which he was very proud of, but he intentionally reversed the role to test Hai Laogong.

"It is the 'antelope hanging its antlers'," Hai Laogong said.

"So you know that one," Wei Xiaobao said. Then he pulled Hai Laogong's arm and slowly twisted it backward.

"Um, that one is the third stance of the 'Falling Broken Plum'," Hai Laogong said, "What else?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Turns out all Xiao Xuanzi's moves have famous names. Then the techniques I used, my random punch and random twist against him should also have some pleasant sounding famous names. I pounced at him, this kid sidestepped, but taking the opportunity he pushed on my back, and I ..."

Without waiting for him to finish, Hai Laogong cut him off, "Where did he push?"

"As soon as he pushed, I was thrown and knocked out of my mind, how could I remember where he pushed?" Wei Xiaobao said.

Hai Laogong said, "Try to remember it, did he push here?" He stretched out his hand to push behind Wei Xiaobao's left shoulder.

"Not there," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"Is it here?" Hai Laogong asked.

Wei Xiaobao still replied, "Not there."

Successively Hai Laogong pressed seven or eight locations, Wei Xiaobao always replied, "Not there." Hai Laogong stretched out his palm to press Wei Xiaobao's right waist underneath his

ribs and asked, "Is it here?" While saying that, he gently pushed.

Wei Xiaobao staggered and tumbled several steps away. Right away he remembered it was the exact spot Xiao Xuanzi had pushed. "That's it!" he shouted, "Dead on, that's the exact spot. Gong-gong, how do you know?"

Hai Laogong did not answer, he was deep in thought for half a day, then said, "I taught you two techniques, yet you say he knew both of them already. Are you telling me the truth?"

"Naturally it's the truth," Wei Xiaobao said, "Genuine goods at fair prices, treating both the young and the old honestly. Not only this kid can press my lower back, he can also crush the pit of my stomach right here, so that I could not breathe, and thus I was forced to surrender that time. It was called ..."

Hai Laogong did not care whatever name Wei Xiaobao was going to mention; he held out his hand and said, "He pressed on the pit of your stomach where?"

Wei Xiaobao pulled his hand and pressed it against the pit of his stomach, right on the spot where Xiao Xuanzi had pressed. "Right here," he said.

Hai Laogong sighed and said, "This is the *zigong* ['purple palace'] acupoint. This child's *Shifu* is a martial art master."

Wei Xiaobao said, "That's nothing, a real man can submit or can stand tall, living on a green mountain, no need to worry there won't be cooking firewood (Book note: the actual phrase is 'firewood to cook with' but he changed it to 'cooking firewood'). I ... I, Wei ... I, Xiao Guizi has lost a fight today, tomorrow I will win it back from him, it's not a difficult matter."

Hai Laogong sat back on his chair. He bent his right hand and stretched it out again, then he stretched it out and bent it again. His eyes closed in contemplation. After quite a long time,

he said, "He knows 'little grappling[41] technique', it's not so strange; but his palm pushed the *yishe* ['desire residence'] acupoint on your right waist, it was exactly Wudang Pai's 'Soft Palm' technique. Afterwards he pressed your *jinsuo* ['muscle shrinkage'] acupoint, and then your *zigong* acupoint. Those are Wudang Pai's acupoint striking technique. Turns out there is a Wudang master hiding in our palace. Hmm, very good! Very good! Tell me, that Xiao ... Xiao Xuanzi, how old is he?"

"He is a lot older than I am," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"How much older?" Hai Laogong asked.

"Several years," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Hai Laogong angrily said, "What do you mean several years? One or two years is several years, eight or nine years is also several years. If he is eight or nine years older than you, do you still want to fight him?"

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "Let's just say he is one or two years older than I am. But he is a lot bigger and taller than I am."

Luckily the opponent was older and bigger, so losing was not considered a major face loss. If not for the fact that he wanted Hai Laogong to teach him some martial art, Wei Xiaobao would have not say anything about his defeat in the duel; when he returned, he would inevitably give an exaggerated account of things, he would say that it was him who scored a big victory instead.

Hai Laogong muttered, "This child is fourteen, fifteen years old. Hmm, how long did you fight him before you were beaten?"

"At least four or six hours [orig. ‘2, 3 *sichen*’, 1 sichen is 2 hours],” Wei Xiaobao said.

Hai Laogong's face sack. "Don't brag!" he barked, "How long?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Perhaps it's less than 2 hours, but it is more than one hour."

"Humph," Hai Laogong said, "I am asking you, you'd better answer nicely. This kid knows martial art, you don't; so even if you lose the fight, you don't lose your face. It does not matter whether you fought ten times or eight times, even if you lose a hundred times, two hundred times, you are still young, what are you afraid of? So long as the last one time you win, your opponent will not dare to fight with you anymore. Now that is a hero and a warrior."

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said, "In the past, Han Gaozu[42] fought a hundred battles and lost a hundred times. Finally in the last battle he beat Chu *Bawang* [Overlord/hegemon Chu] that he hanged himself by the River Wu ..."

Hai Laogong said, "What do you mean he hanged himself by the River Wu? He cut his own throat by the River Wu."

"Hanging himself or cutting his own throat, it does not matter, he lost and thus he killed himself," Wei Xiaobao said.

"You always want to win every argument," Hai Laogong said, "Tell me, during your fight with Xiao Xuanzi today, how many times did he beat you?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "About one or two times, maybe two or three times."

"It was four times, wasn't it?" Hai Laogong said.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Actually, I really lost twice, the other two times he was cheating, it didn't count."

"Each time how long did you fight?" Hai Laogong asked.

"I didn't keep track of the time," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Sometimes it was like pooping, sometimes it was like peeing."

"Rubbish!" Hai Laogong said, "What do you mean sometimes

it was like pooping, sometimes it was like peeing?"

"Defecating is somewhat slower," Wei Xiaobao explained, "Urinating does not take too much time."

Hai Laogong chuckled, he said, "Although this kid's analogy is vulgar, what he said is very clear." After pondering for half a day he said, "You have not learned martial art, this Xiao Xuanzi still need to fight you for a while before he can knock you down, that means his 'little grappling technique' is newly learned. Don't be afraid, I'll teach you the 'big grappling technique'. Learn it well, and tomorrow you may challenge him again."

Wei Xiaobao was delighted. "He is using the 'little grappling technique', we are using the 'big grappling technique', big will overcome small, we will definitely win," he said.

"That's not necessarily true," Hai Laogong said, "Both big and small grappling techniques have their own strong points. We must take the practitioner into consideration. If he trained better than you do, the little grappling technique will surpass the big grappling technique. This big grappling technique altogether has eighteen moves, each one has seven or eight variations. You won't be able to remember all, let's practice one or two moves before we proceed further."

Right away he stood up and performed the move. Finished with one move, he said, "This move is called 'Immortal Crane Combing its Plume'. Practice it well, then try it with me."

Wei Xiaobao only looked one time, and he already remembered. After practicing for seven, eight times, he thought he had mastered it well. He said, "I have mastered it."

Still sitting on a chair, Hai Laogong stretched out his left arm to grab Wei Xiaobao's shoulder. Wei Xiaobao raised his hand to ward it off, but he was one step slower, his shoulder was already grabbed.

"Mastered what? Practice again," Hai Laogong said.

Wei Xiaobao practiced several more times, then he tried it again with Hai Laogong. Hai Laogong stretched out his left arm, he was using exactly the same posture and move as the previous time. This time Wei Xiaobao was prepared, as soon as he saw the hand moved, he raised his hand to ward off; who would have thought that he was still somewhat slower and his shoulder was grabbed again.

"Humph," Hai Laogong said, "Little idiot!"

In his heart, Wei Xiaobao cursed, "Old turtle!" And he was back practicing again.

By the third try, his shoulder was still grabbed; he could not help but feeling at a loss, without knowing the reason.

"This grab of mine," Hai Laogong said, "Even if you practice for three years, you won't necessarily be able to parry. Let me tell you this: if you cannot evade, when my hand is moving to your shoulder, you must use your palm to chop my wrist. It is called using offense as a defense."

Wei Xiaobao was delighted. "So that's how it is, it's very easy!" he said, "If you have told me earlier, I would have mastered it early on."

As soon as Hai Laogong's left hand came to grab him, Wei Xiaobao raised his right palm to chop down on his wrist. Unexpectedly, Hai Laogong did not even withdraw his hand, his palm moved slightly to the side, 'Slap!' he heavily slap Wei Xiaobao's face. Wei Xiaobao was angry, he also tried to slap Hai Laogong's face. Hai Laogong flipped his left palm to catch Wei Xiaobao wrist and casually flung him away. He laughed and said, "Little idiot, have you remembered it?"

As he was being thrown away, Wei Xiaobao's shoulder crashed into the foot of the wall. Fortunately in this throw Hai Laogong only used very light force, otherwise his shoulder bones might

be broken by the collision. Wei Xiaobao was very angry, the curse 'Old Turtle' was already at the tip of his tongue, but in the end he was able to curb it. He thought, “These two techniques are very good, when I fight Xiao Xuanzi tomorrow, I’ll use one of these damn moves, I guaranteed Xiao Xuanzi won’t be able to withstand.” Immediately he crawled up and tried to commit Hai Laogong’s two techniques into his memory, and then practiced it several times.

After practicing it for about a dozen times, Hai Laogong’s mysterious technique did not seem too unfathomable anymore, until finally he was able to evade the grab on his shoulder, but all along he was never able to avoid the slap on his face. It’s just that Hai Laogong did not use as much force as he did the first time, as long as his hand and fingers brushed away lightly on Wei Xiaobao’s face, it was already considered a slap. Although this brush was not painful, each time he was always hit on the same spot. Since Wei Xiaobao was always unable to counter, Hai Laogong did not grab and fling him away like before.

In his heart Wei Xiaobao was dismayed, “Gong-gong,” he asked, “How do I evade this move of yours?”

Hai Laogong smiled faintly and said, “If I want to hit you, even if you practice for ten years you won’t be able to evade. But Xiao Xuanzi won’t be able to beat you either. Let’s practice the second move.” He stood up and demonstrated the second move of the 'big grappling technique', called the ‘apes and monkeys pick the fruits’, and then have Wei Xiaobao tried it to him.

By nature, Wei Xiaobao was very lazy; actually, he was unwilling to diligently learn martial art, but his desire to win and outdo others took precedence, he wholeheartedly wanted to master these several ingenious techniques to force Xiao Xuanzi to call ‘surrender’; therefore, he painstakingly practiced these moves. Surprisingly, Hai Laogong was not fed up with him at all.

From afternoon to evening that day, the two of them trained incessantly. Hai Laogong was sitting on a chair, his arm was able to reach anywhere at will. As soon as he made a move, Wei Xiaobao was hit, but on the whole his force was very light, each move did not use much strength. Even so, when he went the bed that night, Wei Xiaobao felt that no part of his entire body, from head to toe, did not ache. For more than half a day, at least he had received four to five hundred hits. As he lying on the bed, he secretly cursed, “Old turtle, you have hit *laozi* so many times. Tomorrow *laozi* will beat Xiao Xuanzi; old turtle, even if you kowtow to *laozi* for three hundred times, *laozi* will not learn martial art from you again.”

The afternoon the next day, after gambling Wei Xiaobao had another duel with Xiao Xuanzi. He noticed that Xiao Xuanzi was wearing another set of new clothes; he mused, “You, this kid, are wearing new set of clothes every day, are you going to visit a girl in a brothel?” He was very jealous, so as soon as he made his move, he ripped his new clothes. ‘Rip’ a large tear appeared on Xiao Xuanzi’s clothes. But in doing so, he had forgotten the newly-learned skill, so that his waist was punched by Xiao Xuanzi; he screamed in pain.

Xiao Xuanzi seized this opportunity to stretch out his finger and poked Wei Xiaobao’s left leg. Wei Xiaobao’s left leg went numb and he fell kneeling down. From behind Xiao Xuanzi pushed, right away Wei Xiaobao tumbled down. Xiao Xuanzi jumped to ride on his back and pressed his *yishe* acupoint. Wei Xiaobao had no choice but to concede.

Wei Xiaobao stood up and focused his attention, waiting for Xiao Xuanzi to make his move, then he used the 'Immortal Crane Combing its Plume', chopping the opponent’s wrist. Xiao Xuanzi hastily withdrew his hand, while sending out a punch. Wei Xiaobao had anticipated this move; he grabbed the wrist and twisted it around, followed by a left elbow strike toward

Xiao Xuanzi's back. Xiao Xuanzi cried out in pain was powerless to resist. This round belonged to Wei Xiaobao.

Ever since the two of them started this martial art competition, this was the first time Wei Xiaobao scored a victory; his joy was unspeakable. Although he had killed a military officer at the Victory Hill in Yangzhou, and killed Xiao Guizi in the palace, but both times he had been cheating. In all the fights in his life, other than bullying eight, nine years old children, which he always triumphed, he had never won any fight against grownups. Occasionally he gained the upper hand by biting, throwing dirt on their eyes, or other despicable tricks. As for chopping people's legs from underneath the table at the restaurant, that was not really a honorable thing to do, so it need not be mentioned anymore. Using a real skill to achieve victory, this was the very first time in his entire life.

In his self-satisfaction, unavoidably his ego was inflated and he lost the third round. In the fourth round, Wei Xiaobao gathered his thoughts and used the move 'apes and monkeys pick the fruits'; he wrestled the opponent for quite a long time, unexpectedly they fell into a deadlock until both of them were depleted of their strengths. Holding each other in their arms, they were panting for breath, and had no choice but to stop fighting.

Xiao Xuanzi was very happy; he laughed and said, "Today your … your skill is progressing. Competing martial art with you is bit more interesting. Who … who taught you?"

Also panting for breath, Wei Xiaobao replied, "I've already known this skill long ago, it's just that I did not use it the previous couple of days. Tomorrow I will show you a more … more formidable technique. Will you or will you not dare to oblige?"

Xiao Xuanzi laughed aloud and said, "Naturally I will oblige, most probably it will be the new technique of yelling

‘Surrender!’.”

“Pei!” Wei Xiaobao spat, “Tomorrow it will be you who scream ‘Surrender!’”

Wei Xiaobao returned to his room. Immensely proud of himself, he said, “Gong-gong, your 'big grappling technique' is really deathly, I twisted that kid’s wrist, and strike his back with my elbow, this kid did not have any choice but to surrender.”

“How many rounds did you fight with him today?” Hai Laogong asked.

“I fought him four rounds, I won two,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Actually, I could win three rounds, but I was not being careful the third time.”

Hai Laogong said, “You always speak ‘breaking seven fastening eight’; if you say that you fought four rounds, at most you only won one round.”

Wei Xiaobao chuckled and said, “The first round I did not win, the second round I really did win. If I have empty words, may the heaven punish and the earth exterminate. The third round he cannot be considered lost, the fourth round we both fought until we are out of strength, so we agree to fight again tomorrow.”

Hai Laogong said, “Tell me truthfully, every move every style, in great details.”

Although Wei Xiaobao had a good memory, his knowledge of martial art was too little, how these four rounds were unfold by every move and every style, he could not narrate in details; he could only remember the third round where he scored a victory and thus the move he was most proud of. But Hai Laogong was insistent that he have a detailed account on how he was defeated. Wei Xiaobao was thinking of giving him a vague answer to dismiss his inquiry, but in the end he had to tell Hai Laogong the truth. The styles Xiao Xuanzi used to score victory,

Hai Laogong was able to spell them out one by one, as if he was personally witnessing the fight, adding ten times the details of what Wei Xiaobao was able to tell. As he mentioned one style, Wei Xiaobao was then able to remember that it was indeed so.

"Gong-gong," Wei Xiaobao said, "You have eyes that can see a thousand *li*; otherwise, how can you know clearly which technique Xiao Xuanzi was using?"

Hai Laogong lowered his head in contemplation, he muttered, "He is really a Wudang master, he is really a Wudang master."

Wei Xiaobao was pleasantly surprised, "You said this kid Xiao Xuanzi is a Wudang Pai master? And I was able to fight this master evenly? Ha ha …"

"Pei!" Hai Laogong spat, "Don't show off shamelessly! Who says he was the master? I was talking about the *Shifu* who taught him punching and kicking."

"So what Sect ['Pai'] do you belong to?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "Our martial art is matchless under the heavens, naturally it is a lot more formidable than Wudang Pai; that is an obvious fact." He still did not know which school Hai Laogong belonged to, but he bragged about it first without restraint.

"I belong to Shaolin Pai," Hai Laogong replied.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, "That's very good; Wudang Pai's martial art encounters our Shaolin Pai, of course they will be utterly defeated, they will run away hiding their tails between their legs."

"Humph," Hai Laogong snorted and said, "I haven't taken you as my disciple, how can you consider yourself a Shaolin disciple?"

Wei Xiaobao embarrassedly said, "I did not say I was a Shaolin Pai disciple, I only learned Shaolin Pai martial art, is that correct?"

Hai Laogong said, “The technique Xiao Xuanzi was using is indeed Wudang Pai’s orthodox *qin na* technique, so we must use Shaolin Pai’s orthodox *qin na* technique to cope with him, otherwise we would not be his match.”

“That’s right,” Wei Xiaobao said, “My lost to him is small matter, implicating the prestige of our Shaolin Pai is greatly unworthy." On how great Shaolin Pai's prestige really was, he was completely clueless, but if he was somewhat responsible of maintaining Shaolin Pai's prestige, it must be not a trivial business.

Hai Laogong said, "I passed on those two moves from the 'big grappling technique' yesterday with the intention of defeating that kid to get out of a difficult situation, so you won't be entangled anymore and can go to the Upper Study Room to get the book. But right now the situation is slightly different. This kid is definitely a direct disciple of Wudang Pai. Then the eighteen moves of the 'big grappling technique' must be taught to you, each stance and each style, from the start. Do you know the 'bow-and-arrow step'?"

"Bow-and-arrow step?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "Isn't that the posture an archer takes when he is bending the bow?"

Hai Laogong's countenance sank, he said, "You want to learn martial art, you must be modest, if you don't know it, just say so. People who learn martial art must abstain from thinking oneself clever, from believing that oneself is infallible. Bend your forward leg on the knee so that it will look like a bow, that is called 'bow foot'. Stick out your back leg in an angle so that it will look like an arrow, that is called 'arrow foot'. When those two are used together, the posture is called 'bow-and-arrow step'." While saying that, he demonstrated the 'bow-and-arrow step' stance.

Wei Xiaobao copied the stance and said, "What's so difficult about this stance? I can do it a hundred or eighty times a day."

Hai Laogong said, "I don't want you to do it a hundred or eighty times, I just want you to do it once. Now do the stance, if I do not tell you to stand up, you must not move." While saying that he ran his hands on Wei Xiaobao's legs to check their positions. He pushed the forward leg further down, and the back leg even straighter.

"It's so easy," Wei Xiaobao said. However, keeping the stance without moving like that, in less than half the time needed to burn an incense, his legs were tingling. "Is it enough?" he called out.

"It is far from enough," Hai Laogong replied.

Wei Xiaobao said, "What's the use of me practicing this strange posture? Are you saying that by doing this I can knock Xiao Xuanzi down?"

Hai Laogong said, "When you train the 'bow-and-arrow step' until your stance is steady, others cannot push you down. Its usefulness is great."

Wei Xiaobao stubbornly argued, "Even if people push me down, I can always stand back up and not suffer any defeat."

Hai Laogong nodded slowly, but did not pay any attention to him. Seeing him nodding, Wei Xiaobao straightened up his body and patted his tingling legs. Hai Laogong barked, "Who told you to stand up? Quickly do the 'bow-and-arrow step' again!"

"I want to poop!" Wei Xiaobao said.

"You can't!" Hai Laogong said.

"I want to poop!" Wei Xiaobao said.

"You can't!" Hai Laogong said.

"My poop is really about to come out!" Wei Xiaobao said. Hai Laogong sighed; he had no choice but to let him go to the toilet to loosen his legs.

Although Wei Xiaobao was intelligent, but to expect him to follow the compass and go with the set square, to follow a prescribed pattern in martial art training, was easier said than done. In the end Hai Laogong did not force him anymore, he only taught him several *qin na* and wrestling techniques. During the sparring, Wei Xiaobao was required to bend down and turn around, to squat and crouch low on the ground; Hai Laogong did not join him in performing these exercises, he only called out the directions and stretched out his hand to feel whether there was any mistake in Wei Xiaobao's posture and technique.

The next day Wei Xiaobao had another martial art competition against Xiao Xuanzi. Thinking that the previous day they fought for four rounds, in which he lost two rounds and won one round, with the newly-learned skill, today he should be able to win all four rounds. Who would have thought that as soon as the fight began, when he use several new techniques against Xiao Xuanzi, regardless of how he was using it, one after another Xiao Xuanzi was able to neutralize it. So much so that Wei Xiaobao lost the first two rounds.

Wei Xiaobao was shocked and angry; in the third round he was extra careful, only then did he manage to twist and pull Xiao Xuanzi's left palm backward that Xiao Xuanzi was unable to turn around and was forced to surrender.

Wei Xiaobao was so immensely proud of himself that he lost again the fourth round. Xiao Xuanzi was able to sit on his head, with both legs astride the back of Wei Xiaobao's neck, so that he was almost suffocated.

After he surrendered, Wei Xiaobao stood up and cursed, "Damn it, you ..."

Xiao Xuanzi's countenance sank. "What did you say?" he asked sternly. Instantly his expression turned cold and imposing.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly alarmed; he mused, "It’s not right, this is the imperial palace, I must not speak vulgar language. Mao *Dage* warned me that when we get to Beijing, we must not say anything wrong. I said ‘damn it’, that means I say something damn wrong, and thus I am exposing my trickery." Thereupon he hastily said, "I said my style 'damn it' cannot defeat you, so I'd better surrender."

Xiao Xuanzi's face showed a smiling expression as he asked, "Your style is called 'damn it' [ta ma de - literally 'his mother's']? What does it mean?"

Wei Xiaobao mused, "I'm lucky, I am lucky! This little turtle lives in the imperial palace all day long, and does not understand the way people on the outside curse." Thereupon he made up a wild story, "This style 'stepping on horse's hoof' [ta ma ti] was originally a skill based on the horse loses its front hooves [figuratively: sudden failure through miscalculation or inattentiveness]. As I 'step on' [ta], you cannot defend against it, so I turn over and press you down. Who would have thought that you were not fooled, so this 'ta ma ti' style was useless."

Xiao Xuanzi roared in laughter and said, "What 'ta ma ti'? Even 'ta niu ti' [stepping on cow's hooof] cannot defeat me. Do you dare to fight with me again tomorrow?"

"Do you need to ask?" Wei Xiaobao said, "Naturally I will fight you. Hey, Xiao Xuanzi, let me ask you one question, please answer me truthfully and honestly, don't conceal anything from me."

"What is it?" Xiao Xuanzi asked.

"The *Shifu* who teach you martial art, he is a Wudang Pai master, isn't he?" Wei Xiaobao said.

"Uh, how did you know?" Xiao Xuanzi wondered.

"I can see from the technique you are using," Wei Xiaobao said.

"You know my martial art style?" Xiao Xuanzi asked, "What is it called?"

"Who does not know?" Wei Xiaobao replied, "That is Wudang Pai's orthodox skill, handed down in direct line from the founder, called the 'little grappling technique', considered first-rate martial art in the Jianghu. However, against our Shaolin Pai's orthodox skill, handed down in direct line from the founder, called the 'big grappling technique', it is still one class lower."

Xiao Xuanzi laughed aloud and said, "What a horn-tooting! Aren't you ashamed of yourself? In our martial art competition today, did you win, or did I win?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Victory or defeat is common in a war, a hero is not measured by victory or defeat."

Xiao Xuanzi said with a laugh, "A hero is not measured by success or failure."

"Victory or defeat is the same as success or failure," Wei Xiaobao said. He had once heard the storyteller mentioning 'A hero is not measured by success or failure', but these two words 'success or failure' was too difficult, so he could not remember it. However, since Xiao Xuanzi was able to say the correct phrase, he could not help but feeling admiration, "You are only a year or two older than I am, yet you actually know a lot of things."

Wei Xiaobao returned to his residence and sighed, "Gong-gong," he said, "The more I learn new technique, the more others also learn new ones; but others' *Shifu* is so skillful, he teaches better technique." He did not say that his own skill was inadequate, but blaming Hai Laogong's teaching method instead.

Hai Laogong said, "Obviously you lost all four rounds today! Muddle-headed kid, you don't blame yourself as being useless, but you come here to complain about others."

"Pei," Wei Xiaobao spat, "How could I lost all four rounds? At least I would win once or twice, or twice, three times. I have asked him today, his *Shifu* is indeed a direct disciple of orthodox school Wudang Pai."

"Did he admit it?" Hai Laogong asked. He sounded rather excited.

Wei Xiaobao said, "I asked him, 'The *Shifu* who teach you martial art, he is a Wudang Pai master, isn't he?' He said, 'Uh, how did you know?' Isn't that the same as admitting it?"

Hai Laogong mumbled, "Just as I thought, it's really Wudang Pai." And then he was lost in thought, seemingly pondering a hard-to-understand matter. After a long time he said, "Let us practice some tripping feet techniques."

And so every day Wei Xiaobao learned new techniques from Hai Laogong, and had his daily martial art contest with Xiao Xuanzi. During training, whenever he encountered a rather difficult technique, Wei Xiaobao would do it perfunctorily with all kinds of obscure excuses. Surprisingly, Hai Laogong followed his whim; disregarding the fundamentals, he only taught him how to dodge, evade, and various kinds of defensive tricks, anything that would give Wei Xiaobao an immediate benefit. However, during his fight with Xiao Xuanzi, Wei Xiaobao's technique was advancing, Xiao Xuanzi's technique was advancing even more. Fighting here and there, out of ten rounds Wei Xiaobao would lose seven or eight times.

Every morning Wei Xiaobao always went gambling with Lao Wu, Ping Wei, Wen Youdao, Wen Youfang and others eunuchs. For the first several days he always had plain white cloth covering his face, but afterwards the covering was getting less and less. Although everybody could see that his facial features were completely different from Xiao Guizi's, but first, they always met in the heat of the gambling, what Xiao Guizi actually looked like, they only remembered it vaguely; second,

Wei Xiaobao was always giving others a loan, so everybody loved this generous friend; third, each day Wei Xiaobao took only a little bit of the wrapping, so the others were slowly getting accustomed to his look, unexpectedly, nobody ask him anything.

When the gambling adjourned, Wei Xiaobao would have his martial art competition with Xiao Xuanzi, and have martial art lesson after lunch. The *qin na* technique he learned was getting increasingly difficult. Wei Xiaobao was disinclined to memorize it, he was even more disinclined to practice; fortunately, Hai Laogong did not force him or insist on supervising him strictly, he simply let nature take its course.

Day in day out, without realizing it Wei Xiaobao had been in the imperial palace for two months. Every day he had money to gamble. Although it could not be said that his life was free and unrestrained, he was actually quite happy. His only regret was that he must not speak any obscenities, wantonly hurling abusive words to others; he also did not dare to imitate dog and steal chicken[43], or to make a scene and raise havoc in the palace. It was a rather minor defect in an otherwise perfect world. Sometimes he did think about escaping from the palace, but he did not know anybody within Beijing's city limit; the more he thought about it, the more trepidation grew in his heart, and thus he kept lingering in the palace for 'yet another day'.

Wei Xiaobao and Xiao Xuanzi had been fighting with each other for two months, they met every day, the friendship between them grew. Wei Xiaobao was getting used to losing, but putting things back in perspective, 'a hero is not measured by victory or defeat'; his win in the gambling arena offset his lost in the martial art arena, and thus he did not give it further thought. Both he and Xiao Xuanzi felt that if they miss a day of martial art contest, their whole body would be uncomfortable.

Wei Xiaobao made a slow progress in martial art skill, but Xiao Xuanzi's progress was also so-so. Although Wei Xiaobao lost more than he won, he was not entirely in losing streak without any victory.

During these past two months, the Wen brothers lost so much money in gambling that they owed Wei Xiaobao more than two hundred *taels*. This particular day, before the game was even finished, the two brothers signaled each other with their eyes. Wen Youdao said to Wei Xiaobao, "Gui *Xiongdi*, we have something we'd like to discuss with you. Let's step aside and talk."

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Do you need some money? No problem."

"Thank you very much," Wen Youfang said. The two brothers went out the door, with Wei Xiaobao following behind them. The three of them went to a side room next door.

“Gui *Xiongdi*,” Wen Youdao said, “You are very young, but you are naturally magnanimous, it is indeed rare.”

Hearing such flattery, Wei Xiaobao’s heart was in full bloom, “There, there! We are brothers here, you lend me, I lend you, why so uptight about it? There are borrowing and there are paying, we are all honest people here.”

In these past two months, he had managed to learn some Beijing accent; although occasionally he would still blurt some Yangzhou slangs, it did not sound too harsh in other people’s ears.

Wen Youdao said, “Our luck these past two months is just not good, we have lost quite a lot of money. Although you, brother, do not mind, in our hearts we are very worried.”

Wen Youfang added, “Our lost is getting heavier and heavier, while your luck is getting better and better, and we owe you more and more money. If this situation continued, we don’t

know how many tears it will take us to pay you back. If we continue on living burdened with debt like this, our lives would be tasteless."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Going into debt and not able to pay back is indeed inevitable and all right, the two of you must not bring it up anymore."

Wen Youfang sighed and said, "*Xiao Xiongdi*'s character, we need not mention again. Frankly speaking, if we owe only you, *Xiao Xiongdi*, even if we owe you for a hundred years, we should not be uptight, should we?"

"Exactly, exactly," Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "But what about two hundred years, three hundred years?"

"Two hundred, three hundred years?" Wen Youfang said, "Everybody will be dead by then." Speaking to this point, he turned toward his elder brother. Wen Youdao nodded. Wen Youfang continued, "However, we, two brothers, know, that *Xiao Xiongdi*'s master is very difficult to deal with."

"You mean Hai Laogong?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Isn't he?" Wen Youfang said, "You, *Xiao Xiongdi*, may not pursue this matter, but there will come a day Hai Laogong will not let us, two brothers, off. If he, Senior, extends one finger to us, the Wen family's *Lao Da* and *Lao Er*[44] won't be able neither to eat nor escape at all. Consequently, we must think of a way to pay the money back."

Wei Xiaobao mused, "Here it comes, here it comes, that old turtle Hai Laogong truly able to prophecy with supernatural accuracy. These days I only remember to practice boxing, to have martial art contest against Xiao Xuanzi, but I completely forgot about going to the Upper Study Room to steal the book. I'd better not mentioning it, I want to see what they are going to say." Thereupon he simply mumbled, "Um," noncommittally.

Wen Youfang said, “We have thought about it over; there is only one way, we ask for *Xiao Xiongdi*’s magnanimity, to write off our debt completely, do not mention it to Hai Laogong. Later, when we brothers win, naturally we will return everything with our thanks, not lacking even a *wen*.”

“Your granny,” Wei Xiaobao cursed in his heart, “You, a pair of stinky turtles, consider me, Wei Xiaobao, as a ‘cattle’? Based on your bastards’ skill, when will you ever win anything back from *laozi*?” Thereupon with an awkward expression he said, “But I have already told Hai Laogong. The Senior says that this money must be paid back, several days delay is all right.”

The Wen brothers looked at each other, with very awkward expression on their faces; obviously these two brothers dreaded Hai Laogong very much. Wen Youdao said, "In that case, we are wondering if *Xiao Xiongdi* would be willing to help us? As you win money later, give it to Hai Laogong, just tell him ... tell him that we are paying you back."

Wei Xiaobao cursed again in his heart, "Your words are getting more and more preposterous, do you think I am a three-year old kid?" But he said, "It's not that I don't want to do it, but I ... my loss will be too great."

From the tone of his voice, the Wen brothers could hear that he was willing to cut them some slack, instantly their faces showed delight as they cupped their hands and said, "Thank you for your kindness, we owe you a big favor."

Wen Youfang said, "*Xiao Xiongdi*'s kindness, the two of us brothers will never dare to forget as long as we live."

Wei Xiaobao said, "If we do it this way, I want the two *Dage* to do me a favor, I wonder if you would be willing to?"

"Of course, of course," the two of them incessantly replied, "Whatever it is, the answer is yes."

Wei Xiaobao said, "I have lived in the palace for many days,

but even His Imperial Majesty's face I have never seen. The two of you are serving His Majesty at the Upper Study Room, I wish to ask the two brothers to take me to see His Majesty."

Immediately the two Wen brothers looked at each other in dismay, with a very distressed expression on their faces. Wen Youdao repeatedly scratched his head. Wen Youfang said, "Ay, this ... this ... this ..." He muttered the word 'this' seven, eight times.

Wei Xiaobao said, "I do not wish to present a memorial to His Majesty, I only want to linger at the Upper Study Room for a while, to see His Majesty's golden face; to slaves like us, that will be our good fortune. If I do not have the good fortune of seeing him, I will not blame the two of you."

Wen Youdao hastily said, "It can be arranged. Today at the *Shenpai* hour [ninth hour, 3 - 5 pm], I will come to your place and take you to the Upper Study Room. At that time, His Majesty is always in the study room writing poetry and do calligraphy; most likely you will be able to see him. At other times His Majesty is working at the Palace Hall, it won't be easy to see him." While saying that, he tilted his head toward Wen Youfang and gave him a wink.

Wei Xiaobao saw this, and the curse 'stinky turtles, thief bastards' was raging in his heart; he pondered over it, "As soon as these two turtles hear I wanted to see the Emperor, their expressions turned very ugly. They said on the ninth hour the Emperor will be at the Upper Study Room, but he most definitely won't be there. They do not dare to let me see the Emperor, so now I want to see him. His granny, if the Emperor speaks to *laozi*, how am I supposed to answer? If I said something that will give me away, won't he order me to be executed along with my whole family to the third generation? Perhaps even *laozi*'s Ma will be dragged away from Yangzhou and be beheaded here. The old turtle Hai teaches me martial

art, but I don't know if he taught me correctly? How come after so many fights I still cannot overcome Xiao Xuanzi? I'd better steal that book - was it thirty-two-chapter sutra or forty-two-chapter sutra? - from the study room and give it to the old turtle. If his heart is happy, perhaps he would teach me real martial art." Thereupon he cupped his hands to Wen brothers to express his gratitude, saying, "If we as slaves cannot even see the Lord of Ten-thousand-year's golden face, when we die, Yan Wang will certainly rain curses on us as turtle bastards."

After his martial art contest with Xiao Xuanzi, he returned to his residence, and told Hai Laogong only the martial art contest's situation; he did not mention even a word about how the Wen brothers had agreed to take him to the Upper Study Room. He thought he would steal the book first, so that the old turtle will be enormously pleasantly surprised.

Just before the appointed time, the Wen brothers really came. Wen Youfang let out a soft whistle. Wei Xiaobao slipped out quietly. The Wen brothers signaled with their hands, but did not say anything. They walked to the west, with Wei Xiaobao following on their heels. Based on previous experience, he now keep his eyes open to commit into his memory the shapes of the corridors, gardens and buildings along the way, so that he could retrace his path without getting lost.

Compare to the building where they gambled, the Upper Study Room was farther away from where he lived; they walked for almost the time needed to prepare tea. With a quiet voice Wen Youdao said, "We have arrived at the Upper Study Room, must be more careful now!"

"I understand," Wei Xiaobao replied.

The two brothers led him circling to the rear courtyard, and entered via a small side door. Passing through two small gardens, they finally entered an enormous room. He saw the room was full with row after row of bookshelves, and each shelf

was full of books; he did not know how many thousands or tens of thousands of book were there. Wei Xiaobao sucked a mouthful of cold air and groaned inwardly, "Hot piece mama did not blossom, once blossoms give birth to a little baby! His granny! The Emperor's room has this many books, all day long he sees books; he sees books in the morning, he sees books in the evening, how will he find time to gamble? Hai Laogong only wants several books, how am I going to find them?"

He grew up in marketplace, he had never seen a study room in all is life, he only knew that if there were seven or eight books in a room, then that room must be a study room. From these seven or eight books, supposedly to find one with the characters ‘thirty-two’ or ‘forty-two’ written on it would not be difficult. At this moment, suddenly seeing thousands or tens of thousands books, he was dazzled and at a loss of what to do. He thought of turning around and running away.

In low voice Wen Youdao said, “Shortly, His Majesty will come into the study room and sit on this desk reading or writing.”

Wei Xiaobao looked at the enormous red sandalwood desk, the tabletop was inlaid with gold and jade. He thought, “The tabletop is inlaid with yellow gold and white jade, certainly it is not a fake. If this thing is scooped out and brought to the jewelry store, it will be sold for quite a bit of money.” He saw a book was spread out on the desk, the ink stone and brush pot to the left were also exquisitely carved. The chair was draped in brocade cloth, embroidered with a golden dragon.

Seeing this kind of imposing style, Wei Xiaobao could not stop his heart from thumping hard. “His granny,” he mused, “This turtle emperor truly lives a happy and prosperous life!”

On the right hand side of the table there was an ancient bronze three-legged pot, where sandalwood incense was being burned. The lid of the pot was shaped like a beast’s head, a wisp of green smoke gracefully curling out from its mouth.

Wen Youdao said, “You may hide behind the bookshelf, looking quietly at His Majesty and that’s it. When His Majesty is reading or writing, no one is allowed to make any noise; you must neither cough nor sneeze. Otherwise His Majesty might get angry and call the Imperial Bodyguard to drag you out and chop off your head.”

“Of course I know I must not cough or sneeze, I must not fart even more,” Wei Xiaobao said.

Wen Youdao’s countenance sank. “*Xiao Xiongdi*, the Upper Study Room is unlike any other places,” he said, “You must not speak anything disrespectful or irreverent.” Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue; he did not dare to say anything. He saw the two brothers picked up a duster and a cleaning rag, and started dusting and wiping everywhere. The study room was exceptionally clean, untainted by even a speck of dust, but the two brothers were still doing their job attentively.

After the Wen brothers finished dusting, they fetched a piece of snow white plain cloth from the cabinet and started wiping everywhere, and then they looked at the white cloth to see if there is any sign of dark spot. They were even more careful than wiping a mirror. They wiped for more than half a day before they quit.

“*Xiao Xiongdi*,” Wen Youdao said, “If His Majesty is still not here in a little while, chances are he is not coming to the Upper Study Room at all today. Soon an Imperial Bodyguard officer will come over to do an inspection, if he sees you in this place, he will investigate and then everybody will eat the blame.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “You can leave first, I want to wait a while before leaving.”

“That won’t do!” the Wen brothers said together. Wen Youdao said, “According to the palace rules, which you are also aware of, wherever His Majesty goes, the ones serving in that area

must not have the slightest carelessness. There are several thousands court eunuchs and palace maids, supposing whenever one of them wanted to see His Majesty would simply walk in to His Majesty’s presence, what will become of the propriety?”

“Good brother,” Wen Youfang said, “It’s not that we brothers do not want to help, but we can be in this Upper Study Room for only an hour a day. Finish cleaning and wiping, we must get out immediately. We are not concealing anything from you, forget about you cannot linger too long in the Upper Study Room, even if we, the two brothers, do not leave when it's time for us to leave, when the Imperial Bodyguard officers investigate and find out, at the most our house will be searched and our possessions confiscated, we will be beheaded, at the least we will be imprisoned with stock over our head."

Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue. "That fierce, huh?" he said.

Stomping his foot, Wen Youfang said, "The matter of His Majesty's safety, do you think we would joke about it? Good brother, if you want to see His Majesty, let's come back tomorrow at the same time to try our luck."

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "Let us go then."

The Wen brothers felt as if a heavy burden was relieved from their shoulders. With one pulling Wei Xiaobao's left arm, the other pulling his right, for fear that he would not leave, they walked him out.

Suddenly Wei Xiaobao said, "Actually, the two of you have never seen His Majesty, have you?"

Wen Youfang was startled, "How ... how did you ..." he stammered. It was obvious that he was going to say, 'How did you know?'. Wen Youdao hastily said, "Why haven't we seen him? His Majesty reads and writes at the Upper Study Room, of course we often see him."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Every day around this time the two of you are in the Upper Study Room wiping and dusting, naturally His Majesty cannot be here. Could it be that when you two bastards are wiping the dust and chasing the dust's grandchildren to the east and to the west, His Majesty would love to watch?"

Wen Youdao added, "*Xiao Xiongdi* agrees to pay Hai Laogong back on our behalf, we brothers will certainly repay your kindness in the future. About seeing His Majesty, that is one's good fortune in life, one's karmic reward cultivated in the previous incarnation, by building the bridge and paving the way, by accumulating innumerable secret virtue. If one is not destined to have this good fortune, one will not achieve it even by forcing it."

While speaking, the three of them exited the side door. Wei Xiaobao said, "In that case, you can take me here again in a few days to try our luck!"

"Excellent, excellent!" the two brothers repeatedly said. And thus the three of them split up.

Wei Xiaobao quickly turned around; passing through two long corridors, he hid behind a sliding door. After a while, he presumed the two brothers already went far away; he came out from the back door and retraced their route back to the study room. When he pushed the side door, to his surprise, the door was bolted from inside. He was startled, thinking, "It was only a short while, the door is already bolted from inside? It seems that the Wen brothers are telling the truth, the Imperial Bodyguard did come to patrol this place. I wonder if they have already left?"

Pressing his ear to the door he tried to listen, but did not hear anything. Then he put his eye to a crack on the door and peeked inside, there was nobody in the courtyard. He thought for a while, and then fished out a very thin dagger from his

boots. It was the same dagger he used to assassinate Xiao Guizi the other day. He was hiding in the Imperial Palace, he knew danger was lurking from all directions, since that day, this dagger had never left his body. Presently he inserted the dagger into the crack on the door and gently pushed several times, the door bolt was lifted up. He shoved the door open two *cun*, and put out his hand through the opening to hold the door bolt, so that it would not fall down and make noise. Then he pushed the door wider and slipped in, lastly, he turned around and reattached the door bolt. After listening attentively and did not hear any noise, he proceeded step by step and poked his head into the study room, luckily there was nobody inside. After waiting for a moment, he went in.

Walking toward the desk, he saw the chair draped in dragon embroidered brocade and had a hard-to-resist sudden impulse. "Damn it, this is the dragon chair the Emperor sit, must *laozi* sit on it?" Taking a diagonal step forward, he suddenly found himself sitting on the chair. At first his heart was thumping fast, but after a while he mused, "This chair is not so comfortable anyway, being the Emperor is nothing extraordinary."

But in the end he still did not dare to sit too long; he stood up and went to the bookshelves to look for the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'. But the bookshelves were full of books stacked up on top of other books. Among the hundreds of titles, he recognized only one or two characters. He did his utmost to find the 'four' character, and found several books that started with the character 'four'; however, none of the next characters were 'ten' or 'two'[45]. Actually, what he found were the 'Four Books'[46], the 'Four-Book Annotation Collection', the 'Four-Book Commentary', and so on. Looking a bit more, he found the 'Analysis on Thirteen Classics[47] Collection'. He knew the two characters 'Thirteen' [shi san], and was delighted for a moment,

but ten realized that eventually it was not the ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’.

While he was still confused, without a clue of what to do, suddenly he heard the sound of boots outside the door on the other side of the study room, followed by the creaking noise of the double-door being opened. Turned out behind the large screen on that side there was another door, from which this person was walking in.

Wei Xiaobao was shocked. “Today *laozi* will be executed to the third generation.” He was thinking of slipping out from the bolted door from which he came, but in any case he was too late, hastily he flattened his body against the wall, shrinking behind a row of bookshelf. He heard two men enter the study room, dusting, brushing and wiping all around.

Not too long afterwards, another man come in, the first two men then withdrew from the study room. This other man was pacing back and forth slowly in the study room. Wei Xiaobao cried out inwardly, “It’s terrible; must be the Imperial Bodyguard on inspection of this room. Could it be that they found a trace of me entering via the back door?” He could not help cold sweat from soaking his back.

The man was pacing back and forth for a good while, suddenly there was a loud and clear voice from outside the door, “Reporting to Your Majesty: Ao *Shaobao* has an urgent matter to kowtow in front of Your Majesty, he is waiting outside.” The man in the study room grunted.

Wei Xiaobao was startled and delighted at the same time. “Turns out this man is the Emperor. That Ao *Shaobao* is the man Mao *Dage* wanted to have a martial art contest with. This man is considered the Manchurians’ number one warrior, I wonder what mighty appearance he looks like, I must steal a look. Next time I see Mao *Dage*, I will have something to tell him.”

He heard heavy footsteps from outside the door, a man entered the study room and said, “Servant Oboi kowtows to Your Majesty!” while kneeling down and pressing his forehead to the ground.

Wei Xiaobao quickly poked his head out to steal a look, he saw a tall and sturdy man crawling on the floor, kowtowing. He did not dare to look too long, for fear that as soon as Oboi raised his head he might see him; hastily he pulled his head back, but he shifted his body slightly to be diagonally opposite to Oboi. He mused, “You are kowtowing to the Emperor, also kowtowing to *laozi*. What First Warrior of Manchuria, or Second Warrior? Nothing special about him, didn’t he kowtow to me, Wei Xiaobao?”

He heard the Emperor say, “Enough!” Oboi rose up and said, “Reporting to Your Majesty: Suksaha is harboring disloyalty, his memorial to the throne is filled with treason and heresy, he must receive supreme penalty.”

“Hmm,” the Emperor grunted noncommittally.

Oboi continued, “Your Majesty has just personally guided the government into a new era, this servant Suksaha presented a memorial to the throne, saying something like ‘Now personally encountering the great government, humbly begs the wise reflection to let your servant, state official, to go guarding the late Emperor’s mausoleum, in order to survive the remaining breath, which is like a string of thread’. Isn’t it obvious? Your Majesty has just taken over the government, and he already desires to die. It is the same as saying Your Majesty is treating his servants with cruelty.”

“Hmm,” the Emperor was still grunting.

Oboi continued, “Your servant has had a conference with the princes and dukes, and various ministers; we are all agree that altogether Suksaha is guilty of twenty-four major crimes, he is

cherishing treachery, harboring disloyalty, taking unfair advantage of the young master, unwilling to return to government service, indeed he is reeking with treason and heresy. According to our dynasty's 'Great Rebellion Law', he and his eldest son, Internal Minister Chakdan, should be put to death with a thousand cuts, his six foster sons, one grandson, and two brothers should be beheaded. His clansmen, the commander of the vanguard regimen Barhe, and imperial bodyguard Otu, should also be beheaded."

"For that kind of crime, isn't the punishment too heavy?" the Emperor said.

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "This emperor's voice sounds like a boy, in fact it is very similar to Xiao Xuanzi's voice. That's funny."

Oboi said, "Reporting to His Majesty: Your Majesty is still young, perhaps you are still not fully clear about the important matter of the imperial court government. This Suksaha accepted orders from the late Emperor, together with your servant and others to be regents, to assist Your Majesty in guiding the government into the new era; we should be delighted to offer our talents. Yet he submitted this memorial to the throne, slandering Your Majesty, obviously he is harboring evil intentions. I request Your Majesty to allow *Chen* to deal with this matter, with power to make more serious punishment. Your Majesty has just taken over the government, you should establish power, to make your subjects' hearts trembled with fear. If you are being lenient to Suksaha, this rebel who harbor treason, someday the other subjects will take advantage of Your Majesty's young age, will speak disrespects, will behave rudely, then Your Majesty's business will not be managed properly."

Listening to the way he speak, Wei Xiaobao thought he was very arrogant, he said in his heart, "You, the old turtle, are the

one who speak disrespect and behave rudely. You said the Emperor is young, could it be that the Emperor is a small boy? This is very interesting, no wonder his voice somewhat sounds like Xiao Xuanzi."

He heard the Emperor saying, "Although Suksaha is wrong, he is an Executive Minister, the same as you, whom the late Emperor held in very high regards. If at the beginning of my taking over the government *Zhen* … *Zhen* [an Emperor addressing himself] kill an important minister whom the late Emperor held in high regards, I am afraid the spirit of the late Emperor in Heaven will not be happy."

Oboi laughed a loud and said, "Very true, but your words are childish talk. The late Emperor appointed Suksaha as an Executive Minister, to serve Your Majesty well, to handle affairs attentively. If he considered the late Emperor's benevolence, he should spare no effort to do his utmost, to go through water and tread on fire, to toil just like a dog or a horse; that is the principle of a servant. Yet this Suksaha bears grievance, publicly slanders Your Majesty, asking for rest, begging for life, regarding his own life more important, and set aside the imperial court's affairs as unimportant. This servant is offending the late Emperor, and not Your Majesty offending this servant. Ha ha, ha ha!"

The Emperor said, "Ao *Shaobao*, what's so funny?"

Oboi was startled, and busily said, "Yes, yes, no, nothing." Wei Xiaobao guessed that right this moment Oboi's expression must be very awkward.

The Emperor was silent for a long time before saying, "Even if I am not offending Suksaha, but if I kill him like this, I would offend the late Emperor's spirit. Either the people under the heavens would say that I kill the wrong person, or they would say that the late Emperor was an incapable ignorant. If the imperial court publishes Suksaha's twenty-four big crimes to the

world, the people would think that Suksaha is so guilty of the most heinous crime, is such a scoundrel, yet the late Emperor unexpectedly appointed him as an Executive Minister, to stand alongside you, Ao *Shaobao*. This … this … isn't this too much without knowledge and experience?"

Wei Xiaobao thought, "This child Emperor's word makes a lot of sense."

Oboi said, "Your Majesty only knows one, does not know two. Whatever the people under the heavens like to think, let them indulge in flights of fancy, but they will not dare to speak as they please. Whoever dares to utter a single sentence that the late Emperor is to be blamed, I want to see how many heads they have."

The Emperor said, "The ancient book said it well: 'Guarding against the mouth of the people is more than guarding against the river'; blindly chopping people's heads, not letting the common people speak out their hearts, in the end it will not bring good."

Oboi said, "The words of the Han scholars are the worst to listen to, if these Han scholars' words were true, how come Han people's rivers and mountains fall into our hands, the Manchus? Therefore, let your servant offers a bit of advice to Your Majesty: those many books of Han people, the less you read the better, the more you read, the more your mind will be muddled."

The Emperor did not reply at all. Oboi continued, "Your servant has followed *Taizong Huangdi*[48] and the late Emperor in battles on all sides, from outside the Pass to inside the Pass, establishing countless meritorious service against the Han cavalry. I did not know a single Han character, yet I killed not a few southern barbarians. We defeat the world, we protect the world, all using our Manchurian way."

The Emperor said, “Without a doubt Ao *Shaobao*’s contribution is enormous, otherwise the late Emperor would not entrust you with such heavy responsibility.”

Oboi said, “Your servant only knows how to serve with body and soul, to handle Your Majesty’s affairs. Ever since *Taizong Huangdi*, to Emperor Shunzi, it’s all the same. The way we Manchus handle affairs is by paying particular attention to bestow rewards and impose punishments, we reward those who are loyal, and punish those who are treacherous. This Suksaha is a major treacherous court official, he must be punished severely.”

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, “Hot piece mama, I only have to listen to your voice and I know that you are the major treacherous court official.”

The Emperor said, “You are determined to have Suksaha killed, in the end, what is your own reason?”

“What reason do I have?” Oboi said, “Could it be that Your Majesty believes your servant has a personal motive?” His voice grew louder, his tone was also growing more stern. After a short pause he said menacingly, “Your servant only has our Manchurian’s realm in my heart. *Taizu Huangdi*[49], *Taizong Huangdi* have painstakingly laid out the foundation, we must not let their descendants make mistake. Your Majesty asks your servant this way, your servant really does not understand Your Majesty’s meaning!”

Hearing he speak with such ferocity, Wei Xiaobao was shocked; he could not bear not to stick out his head to look, and saw a fierce-looking big man, his eyebrows were raised straight up, like a monster he stepped forward, his hands were tightly clenched into a pair of fists.

“Ah!” a young man cried out in alarm and jumped up from the chair. The young man turned his head sideways, and Wei

Xiaobao could not refrain from letting out an ‘Ah!’ cry of his own. This young Emperor was not a stranger, he was precisely the boy who had martial art contest with him every day, Xiao Xuanzi.

Chapter 5

Golden spear to dispel the society, a book in jade box to keep the fantasy

(Translated by Foxs)

The twelve little eunuchs pounced together, they firmly hold on to Oboi's waist and legs. Aiming for the 'sun acupoint' on Oboi's temple, Wei Xiaobao sent out a ferocious punch. Kangxi clapped his hands and laughed. "Ao Shaobao," he said, "I am afraid you are going to lose."

Seeing the Emperor, even if his appearance was like a demon or a ghost, it was unlikely that Wei Xiaobao would cry out or make any noise; but seeing it was Xiao Xuanzi, his shock was really not mild. As soon as the cry escaped his mouth, he knew he was in deep trouble. He turned around at once, thinking to escape, but then he had a second thought, “Xiao Xuanzi’s martial art skill is higher than mine, but that Oboi is even more formidable, when all is said and done, I still cannot escape.” He also had a sudden inspiration, “Our valuables are already down on the table! Either we make a kill or we get killed, it’s time to roll the dice.”

Leaping out, he stood in front of the Emperor, and shouted to Oboi, “Oboi, what are you doing? You dare to be rude to His Majesty? You want to beat people, kill people, you must go over me first.”

Oboi had fought hundreds of battles, rendered great many services, he had little regard of the young Emperor Kangxi. Kangxi’s [Book note: Kangxi was an era name (subdivision in the reign of an emperor), but it is a common practice in popular fiction not to call him by his original name Xuan Ye (‘xuan’ - black/mysterious, ‘ye’ glorious/blaze of fire), instead, he was only known as Kangxi.] scorning his desire to kill Suksaha as stemmed from selfish intention had been exposing his painful sore. This man was a warrior who used to charge and break through enemy lines, in his anger, he was going to let his fist do the talking against Kangxi, he had never thought about rebelling or defying his superior. When he suddenly saw a little eunuch jumping out from behind the bookshelf and blocking in front of the Emperor, reproaching him, he could not help but was startled and only then did he remember that as a subject, he was making a fist and threatening the Emperor. Hastily he retreated several steps and sternly said, “What nonsense are you talking about? I was only going to make a report to His Majesty; who dares to be rude to His Majesty?” While speaking,

he took two more steps backward, with hands hanging on his sides.

The Xiao Xuanzi who had martial art match with Wei Xiaobao every day was indeed the current emperor of the Great Qing, Emperor Kangxi. His given name was Xuan Ye. Realizing that Wei Xiaobao did not recognize him and asked for his name, in his childish innocence, he blurted out his name as 'Xiao Xuanzi'. Inheriting Manchurian's habit, he loved to wrestle. It's just that when one is in training of this kind of skill, one must scuffle and tumble, pull the neck and bend the waist. Although the imperial bodyguards taught him the wrestling technique, who would dare to treat the Emperor in this rude, uncouth manner? Who would dare to pull his dragon head or clutch his imperial neck forcefully? When they were compelled, they would put on a good act. When the Emperor's imperial leg swept, they would immediately tumble over; when the Emperor's hand twisted theirs, they would immediately kneel down to surrender. When they were forced to retaliate by a move or half a style, they would only touch the edge of the Emperor's clothing before stopping instantly.

Kangxi repeatedly urged them to fight for real, but none of the imperial bodyguards had this kind of guts. At most they would make some effort to act better. Even in playing chess with the Emperor, they might make a convincing act of giving a fierce resistance, by making some killing or lock the pieces in inextricably positions, until at the final juncture, they would inevitably lost the game [Book note: reportedly, during the final years of the Qing Dynasty, Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) was playing Chinese chess with certain eunuch; the eunuch captured Cixi's horse (or knight) and said, 'Your servant has captured one of Old Buddha's horses'. [In late Qing Court, the term 'Old Buddha' refers exclusively to Empress Dowager Cixi]. Angered by his rude remark, Cixi immediately ordered him to be dragged out and beaten to death].

Actually, it was extremely difficult to pretend in wrestling. Granted that they had to lose eventually, but during the match, who would dare to grab the emperor and fling him away? Kangxi had a very high interest in wrestling. He always saw the imperial bodyguards staking everything they had and displaying hundreds of brilliant techniques when wrestling with each other, but when they wrestled against him, they would immediately shake with fear, their competency dead and their spirit subdued; he was extremely dissatisfied. Later, he took the court eunuchs as his opponents, but every one of those eunuchs only love to take a beating and none dare to retaliate, just like he was fighting dead people.

Being an emperor means he could do whatever he wanted to do, but to find a genuine opponent in martial art match proved to be a very difficult matter to accomplish. Sometimes he really wanted to leave the palace incognito, to find a commoner with whom he may fight, to find out the level of his own martial art skill level. But this kind of action was extremely dangerous, in the end it was no more than a fantasy, which the young emperor indulged in his heart once in a while.

That day when he met Wei Xiaobao, he had a really good fight. Wei Xiaobao was fighting with everything he had, yet in the end he lost. Kangxi was extremely happy, he felt this fight was the most satisfying he had ever had in his entire life. Wei Xiaobao challenged him to have another match the following day; it was exactly his heart’s desire. Henceforth the two of them had a martial art contest every day. From the very beginning, Kang Xi had never exposed his own status. During the match, he also prohibited other eunuchs from coming too near, so as not to let them divulge the secret. As soon as this little eunuch knew the opponent was the Emperor, the match would be not in the least interesting anymore.

There were thousands of court eunuchs in the Palace, those

who had never seen the Emperor was also not a few. But when they first entered the Palace, they had to learn all kinds of customs and regulations of the Palace, as well as the color of the clothes to distinguish the relative superiority of the workforce. No one but the impostor Wei Xiaobao see the Emperor's clothes Kangxi was wearing yet failed to recognize him. To Kangxi however, this muddleheaded little eunuch worth more than ten thousand *taels* of gold, indeed it was a rare opportunity and extremely valuable to him.

Hereafter Kangxi's martial art skill gradually progressed; unexpectedly Wei Xiaobao was also able to keep up with him. The two of them fighting back and forth, all along they were like two armies of equivalent banners and drums. Moreover, Wei Xiaobao was only a notch inferior to him, and thus Kangxi must strive to train harder, so that he would not be defeated. He was a very competitive and always-eager-to-outdo-other type of person, the more he progressed, the higher his interest grew; while his favorable impression toward Wei Xiaobao was also greatly increased.

This day Oboi went up the Upper Study Room to present a memorial, petitioning the Emperor to kill Suksaha. Kangxi was already aware that because of internal power struggle between Oboi's Bordered Yellow Banner and Suksaha's Plain White Banner, Oboi harbored an enmity against Suksaha. Therefore, his insistence today that Suksaha be executed was because of personal grudges, consequently, he played slowly, unwilling to grant the petition. Who would have thought that Oboi was aggressive and domineering; in his raging temper, he exhibited the bad habit of a man of war; stroking his sleeves and made a fist, he was about to charge forward.

Oboi was a huge man with ferocious look; seeing him coming up aggressively, Kangxi was unavoidably shocked. His imperial bodyguards were waiting outside the study room, so even if he

shouted they would be too late to help; besides, most of the imperial bodyguards were Oboi's trusted aides and cannot be relied on. While he was at a loss of what to do, by lucky coincidence Wei Xiaobao leaped out of his hiding place.

Kangxi was greatly delighted, he thought, "If I join hands with Xiao Guizi, we might be able to fight this Oboi." But then he saw Oboi retreated, so he was even more relieved.

Wei Xiaobao was unable to restrain his emotion and gave out a cry of alarm, and thus revealed himself. He had no choice but to take a chance, to gamble, by dashing out and barking at Oboi. To his own surprise, Oboi backed off; this made him really happy. He loudly said, "To kill Suksaha or not, naturally it's His Majesty's decision. You are being rude to His Majesty, by making fist and was about to hit him, aren't you afraid to be beheaded and your possessions confiscated?"

His words had touched Oboi's heart; immediately his back was wet with cold sweat, knowing that just now his action was indeed too reckless. At once he said to Kangxi, "Your Majesty must not listen to this little eunuch's nonsense. Your servant is a greatly loyal minister."

Since Kangxi had just taken over the government, he was actually very afraid of Oboi. Seeing Oboi withdrew and yielded, he thought that this was not the right moment to confront him face-to-face; thereupon he said, "Xiao Guizi, step aside."

Wei Xiaobao bowed and replied, "Yes!" He retreated to one side of the desk.

"Ao *Shaobao*," Kangxi said, "I know you are a greatly loyal minister. You are used to charge and break through the enemy lines, and not a refine man like those scholars, I am not going to blame you."

Oboi was greatly delighted. "Yes, yes," he hastily said.

Kangxi said, "About Suksaha, I'll leave it you to handle. You

are a greatly loyal minister, he is a greatly treacherous minister. Naturally I will reward loyalty and punish treachery."

Oboi was even more delighted; he said, "Your Majesty has understood the truth. Hereafter your servant will loyally and devotedly let Your Majesty handle the government affairs."

"Very good, very good," Kangxi said, "I will petition Empress Dowager during the morning audience tomorrow, to reward you heavily."

"Thank you very much, Your Majesty," Oboi happily said.

"Anything else?" Kangxi asked.

"No, your servant asks to be excused," Oboi replied. Kangxi nodded. With smile across his entire face, Oboi withdrew.

Kangxi waited until Oboi was out of the room before he jumped out of the chair and said with a laugh, "Xiao Guizi, now you know my secret."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Your Majesty, I ... I really deserve to die, I did not know you are the Emperor, and have exchanged blows and kicks with you; that was really too bold."

Kangxi sighed and said, "Ay, now that you know, you won't dare to fight with me for real, that will be extremely boring."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "As long as you are not offended, there is no harm in me fighting you for real."

Kangxi was delighted. "Alright," he said, "Once you've made a promise, if you don't fight for real, you are not a true man." While saying that, he held out his hand.

First of all, Wei Xiaobao did not know any court customs, secondly, he was a mischievous person who was afraid of neither the heavens nor the earth; he also held out his hand to grasp the extended hand and said with a laugh, "From now on, if I don't fight for real, I am not a true man." Grabbing each

other's hand, the two of them broke into a laughter.

As soon as the crown prince leaves his mother's womb, he is doomed to be the future emperor. The instructions with which he was nurtures are completely different from those of the average man. His cry, his laugh, his action, his movement, none was not scrutinized by lots of eyes; in fact, he did not even have half a part of freedom. The prisoner locked up in jail can still talk as he wishes; he can still move at will in the confinement of his prison cell. The restriction the crown prince must abide by is actually a hundred times more strict. The 'master guardian'[50] in charge of teaching him to read, the court eunuchs and palace maids in charge of his day-to-day necessities, were afraid the Crown Prince would befall any mishap, they all lived in constant fear, as if they were facing a bottomless abyss, as if they were treading on thin ice. If the Crown Prince ever utters half a word of wantonness, the master would earnestly advise him, for fear that the Emperor would be provoked to anger. If the Crown Prince wishes to wear a little less clothing, the court eunuchs and palace maids would act as if they were facing imminent catastrophe, for fear that the Crown Prince would catch cold. If any man lives this kind of life since childhood, day and night suffers this kind of strict surveillance, he really miss out a lot of life pleasures. Throughout history, there were a considerable number of muddleheaded monarch and tyrants; this is one of the reasons. After the individual attained the freedom of action when he became the emperor, he would immediately want to vent the depression and anger accumulated over the years, by doing all kinds of misdeed, which other people see as unreliably repulsive, but mostly was nothing more than excessive venting of pent-up energy.

Kangxi also received this kind of strict treatment since childhood. It was not until he took over the government that he

often ordered the court eunuchs and palace maids to keep some distance from him, and need not following him left and right. However, in front of his mother and various senior ministers, he still had to follow the rules, to act the part of a youngster with mature disposition. In front of the court eunuchs and palace maids, he still had to display the air of the Emperor, he did not dare to be negligent. In all his life, the number of occasions he was able to laugh heartily was only a handful.

However, young people always love to play and enjoy festivities, which is human nature, there is no difference between an emperor or a beggar. In common people's homes, any boy can shout and jump randomly, can fight and make a ruckus with their playmates daily. But if this young emperor wanted to enjoy this kind of opportunity, he would need 'good fortune' and 'karma'. Only when he was with Wei Xiaobao did he enjoy true freedom, abandoning his emperor's persona and wrestled to his heart's content. Indeed he had never experience such happiness in all his life. During these days, even in his sleep he would often dream of wrestling and frolicking with Wei Xiaobao.

Holding Wei Xiaobao's hand, Kangxi said, "In front of other people, you call me 'His Majesty', but if nobody’s around, we are still like before.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Nothing better than that. Even in my wildest dream I would never thought that you are the Emperor. I always thought that the emperor is an old man with white beard.”

Kangxi mused, “When Father Emperor passed away, he was no more than twenty four years old, not any old man with white beard. Don’t you, this little kid, know anything?” He asked, “Could it be that Hai Laogong has never told you about me?”

“Never,” Wei Xiaobao shook his head, “He only taught me how

to practice martial art. Your Majesty, who taught you martial art?”

Kangxi laughed and said, “We said when nobody’s around, we are still like before; why do you call me ‘Your Majesty’?”

Wei Xiaobao also laughed, “That’s right,” he said, “I am a bit nervous.”

Kangxi sighed, he said, “I knew it, as soon as you know I am the Emperor, you won’t fight me like you used to do.”

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, “I will definitely fight you like I used to, it’s just that I am afraid it won’t be easy. Hey, Xiao Xuanzi, who taught you martial art?”

“I can’t tell you that,” Kangxi replied, “Why do you ask?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “That fellow Oboi thinks that his own martial art skill is superb, so he wanted to crush you with his fist and wipe you with his palm, he seemed eager to beat people. I am thinking that your *Shifu*’s martial art skill must be very high, let’s invite your *Shifu* to deal with him.”

With a faint smile Kangxi shook his head and said, “That won’t do; how can my *Shifu* do such thing?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Too bad my *Shifu* Hai Laogong is blind, otherwise we can ask him to beat Oboi, most likely he will be able to defeat him. Ah, I know, tomorrow the two of us join hands to fight him, what do you say? Although this Oboi is Manchurian’s number one warrior, but with the two of us fighting together, we might not necessarily lose.”

Kangxi was ecstatic; “Wonderful, wonderful!” he called out; but immediately realized that this plan would be difficult to execute. He shook his head and sighed, “The Emperor fights his senior minister, that doesn’t make any sense.”

“It would be better if you are not the Emperor,” Wei Xiaobao said.

Kangxi nodded; for an instant he was envious of this little eunuch Wei Xiaobao, who was able to do anything he liked. Although he was in the Imperial Palace, he was still free and unrestrained. He also recalled Oboi's furrowed brows and blazing eyes just now, his aggressive bearing as he strode toward him, and could not stop his heart from thumping fast. He thought, "This man was so rude to me, whoever he wanted to kill, he would simply kill, without giving me any consideration at all. Who is the real emperor? Is it he, or I? But all Imperial Bodyguards in the Palace are under his command, the Eight Banners troops' movement is also under his control. If I issue an imperial decree ordering his execution, he might raise an upheaval and perhaps he would kill me first. I must replace the Imperial Bodyguard Chief first, and then take away his military leadership; next I must remove him from his Executive Minister position, and lastly push him out of the *Wu Men* [Meridian Gate], and behead him publicly; only then will I vent the hatred in my heart."

But then he had a second thought that this plan was not appropriate, since as soon as he replaced the Imperial Bodyguard Chief, Oboi would immediately know that he was about to deal with him. This man wielded enormous power; if he managed to strike first and gain the upper hand, Kangxi himself would suffer calamity. Thereupon he decided not to make any move for the time being, and waited until he could think of a proper method before making his move.

He did not want to appear clueless in front of Wei Xiaobao, thereupon he said, "Go back to Hai Laogong's place, practice your martial art well, tomorrow we still have a martial art match over there."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao complied.

Kangxi added, "Don't say anything about you seeing me and Oboi."

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “There is no one else here, if I want to leave I can just leave, I don’t have to pay respect and kowtow to you.”

Kangxi laughed aloud; he waved his hand and said, “No need, tomorrow we still have an appointment to the death, don’t leave before we meet.”

Although Wei Xiaobao had failed to steal the ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’, but he discovered that the person he had martial art match with every day was unexpectedly the Emperor, so he was extremely excited. Fortunately Hai Laogong was blind, so he was unable to see anything different on Wei Xiaobao’s expression; yet he felt that Wei Xiaobao was especially talkative that day, only he did not know what matter had made him very cheerful, so he tried to probe him with several questions, but Wei Xiaobao was alert, he did not slip even half a word.

The next day Wei Xiaobao went to have a martial art match with Kangxi. He had every intention to fight just like he always did; however, since he was aware the opponent was the Emperor, although while he managed to give a tight defense, his offense was involuntary weak and powerless. Kangxi understood his kindly feelings, so he also reduce his power in his offense, thinking that since the opponent was damped by his own conscience, if he launched an all out attack, the victory he earned would be an unfair one. They only fought for a short moment and Wei Xiaobao had already lost two rounds.

Kangxi sighed and said, "Xiao Guizi, why did you go to my study room yesterday?"

Wei Xiaobao replied, "Wen Youdao had a fever yesterday, and could not get up. His brother asked me to help him clean up and tidying the Upper Study Room. I have never done it before, so I was a bit slow; I did not expect to meet you." He spoke those words seriously, not only his face did not change, he

himself was also convinced that that was what actually happened.

Kangxi said, "After you find out that I am the Emperor, we cannot have any real fight anymore." There was disappointment in his voice.

"I also felt that I don't have any strength to fight today," Wei Xiaobao said.

Suddenly Kangxi remembered something, he said, "I know what to do. Since we cannot fight anymore, I can watch you fight with other people. At least that will satisfy my craving. Come, let us change our clothes, we'll go to the clothes warehouse."

"What kind of place is the clothes warehouse?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "Is it the place where you store the fabric?"

Kangxi laughed, "No," he said, "The clothes warehouse is where the warriors train martial art and wrestling."

Clapping his hands, Wei Xiaobao said, "That's wonderful!"

Kangxi changed his clothes, Wei Xiaobao followed behind him. When he finished changing his long gown, accompanied by sixteen court eunuchs, the ones in front shouting his arrival, the ones in rear escorting him, he went to the clothes warehouse to see the warriors wrestling. His expression was stately, he no longer chit-chatted with Wei Xiaobao.

Seeing the arrival of the Emperor, none of the warriors did not strive to excel the others. Kangxi watched for a while, then he called a big and fat warrior over and said, "I have a little eunuch here, he had learned a bit of wrestling. I want you to teach him some tricks." Turning his head to Wei Xiaobao he said, "I want you to learn from him." As he said this he signaled him with his left eye. The two of them had seen that although this warrior was big and tall, he was quite clumsy, it looked like he was not Wei Xiaobao's match.

The two of them went down the arena and wrestled several rounds. Wei Xiaobao launched the 'push the boat with the current' move, intending to push the warrior away. Unexpectedly, the warrior's body was too heavy, whatever he did, he simply could not push him away. The warriors' chief turned around and winked several times. The big fat warrior understood, he pretended to stumble and fell down on the floor, and did not crawl back up for quite some time.

The crowd of warriors and eunuchs broke in loud cheers. Kangxi was very happy, he ordered a nearby eunuch to reward Wei Xiaobao with a silver ingot. Kangxi thought, "Xiao Guizi's martial art skill is inferior to mine, if he can push this fat fellow down, so can I." His heart was unbearably itching to give it a try, but he was the Lord of Ten-thousand Years, and must not go down the arena to fight. He sighed and said to the nearby eunuch, "Choose thirty little eunuchs, around fourteen, fifteen years of age, tell them to come over here to train every day. Whoever makes the fastest progress like Xiao Guizi here, will receive a reward." With a smile on his face the eunuch complied, thinking that the Emperor still had his childish nature, and wanted to have some new toys to play with.

Wei Xiaobao returned to his room. Hai Laogong asked him the result of his martial art match with Xiao Xuanzi today. Wei Xiaobao narrated the fight dramatically, as if it was a great war, with both sides involved in an extraordinarily intense battle. But under Hai Laogong's interrogation, he soon revealed some flaws in the story. With a straight face Hai Laogong asked, "What happened to Xiao Xuanzi? Is he ill today?"

"He isn't," Wei Xiaobao replied, "But he is not in a good spirit."

"Humph," Hai Laogong said, "Tell me everything, from beginning to end, every move and every style." Wei Xiaobao knew he could not conceal anything from him; having no other choice, he gave him a truthful account of what actually

happened.

Hai Laogong raised his head and slowly said, "With this move you clearly can pull his head to the left, but you wrapped your arms around his body instead, to such an extent that you lost. It's not that you cannot do it, but rather, you were deliberately yielding to him; why is that?"

"I was not deliberately yielding to him," Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "It's just that he did not hit me too hard, so I was also being lenient to him. He and I have become good friends, naturally we both did not use too much force." Thinking that he had become a good friend of the Emperor, he could not help but was feeling very proud of himself.

"You and he have become good friends?" Hai Laogong said, "Humph, it's not that you were being lenient to him, but you did not dare to knock him. Finally ... finally you know?"

Wei Xiaobao's heart skipped a beat, with a trembling voice he said, "Know … know what?"

Hai Laogong said, "Did he tell you himself, or did you guess?"

"What are you talking about?" Wei Xiaobao said, "I don't understand."

Hai Laogong sternly said, "Just tell me truthfully! (Cough, cough … Cough, cough …) How did you know Xiao Xuanzi's identity?" He reached out and grabbed Wei Xiaobao's left wrist.

Immediately Wei Xiaobao felt severe pain enter his bone marrow, with the bones of his hand cracking, as if it was about to snap. "I surrender, I surrender!" he called out.

"How did you know?" Hai Laogong asked, his grip was getting tighter instead.

"Hey, hey, you … you ... don't you understand the rule?" Wei Xiaobao cried out, "I already shouted 'surrender' and you still haven't let go?"

“I am asking you, you’d better answer me nicely,” Hai Laogong said.

“Alright,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “If you knew long ago who Xiao Xuanzi really is, I will talk reason with you. Otherwise, even if you pinch me to death, I will not tell you.”

“What’s so strange about it?” Hai Laogong said, “Xiao Xuanzi is His Majesty; when I started teaching you the ‘big grappling technique', I was already aware of it.” While saying that he let Wei Xiaobao go.

“Turns out you already knew,” Wei Xiaobao happily said, “I had a hard time hiding it from you. In that case there is no harm in me telling you.” Thereupon he narrated how he met Kangxi and Oboi by accident in the Upper Study Room the previous day, he also talked about how he knock down a big fat warrior at the clothes warehouse today; he spoke with his eyebrows dancing around. Hai Laogong was listening attentively, he constantly interrupted the story with questions.

Finished telling the story, Wei Xiaobao said, “His Majesty ordered me not to say anything to you, if you reveal this secret, our two heads will roll.”

Hai Laogong coldly said, “His Majesty is your good friend, he won’t kill you, he’ll kill me.”

Immensely proud of himself, Wei Xiaobao said, “It’s good that you know.”

Hai Laogong was deep in thought for half a day, then he said, “His Majesty wants thirty little eunuchs to train martial art together, what's his intention? Most probably his hands are itching, fighting with you did not satisfy his craving, so he is looking for some little eunuchs to receive his beatings." Standing up, he walked in circle around the room for ten times, he then said, "Xiao Guizi, do you want to flatter the Emperor?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "He is my good friend; making a friend

happy is also a principle of being friends."

Hai Laogong sternly said, "I have something to tell you, I want you to remember it well. From now on, whenever the Emperor says you are his friend or what have you, you must never accept it. Who do you think you are, that you can be the Emperor's friend? Today he is only a child, and he said that in a cheerful mood; how can you take it seriously? If you keep speaking nonsense, just be careful with the head above your neck."

Actually, Wei Xiaobao also realized that this kind of matter should not be spoken thoughtlessly or randomly; as soon as he was reminded by Hai Laogong with such hasty words and stern countenance, he stuck out his tongue and said, "Later I won't say it even if my head is chopped. It's just that after the head rolls to the ground, whether the mouth can still speak or not, perhaps we need to pay particular attention."

"Humph," Hai Laogong snorted, "Do you want to learn high quality martial art or not?" he asked.

Wei Xiaobao happily said, "If you want to teach me high quality martial art, that's truly what I've been looking for. Gong-gong, you have such a good martial art skill, but you did not take a single disciple to pass it on, isn't that a pity?"

Hai Laogong said, "There are too many sinister and deceitful people in the world, while those who are honest, considerate and sincere are a few. If I took a bad disciple and let him conspire against his *Shifu*, why bother?"

Wei Xiaobao's heart was stirred, he mused, "I made his eyes blind, I wonder if he had a bit of suspicion in his heart? This is a matter of life and death, I simply must investigate it clearly." But looking at Hai Laogong's wooden face, he could not see any trace of anger; thereupon he said, "That's right, one who is trustworthy and loyal to you, is not easy to find. I am afraid in

this whole wide world there is only Xiao Guizi one person. Gong-gong, why do you think I went to the Upper Study Room? I brave the danger, risking my head, to steal that 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra' for you. It's just that in His Majesty's study room the books number in thousands and ten thousands, and I don't know too many characters ..."

"Um," Hai Laogong interrupted, "You don't know too many characters!"

Wei Xiaobao's heart jumped. "Aiyo, not good!" he cried out inwardly, "I don't know if Xiao Guizi knew many characters or not, if he knew a lot of characters, what I said might give me away." He said hastily, "I looked everywhere, but did not find that 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'. But don't worry, later I can go to the Upper Study Room often, I will then be able to snatch this book like leading away a got in passing[51], or plucking the peach away while the leaves are falling."

"You haven't forgotten," Hai Laogong said, "That's good."

"How can I forget?" Wei Xiaobao said, "Gong-gong's kind treatment to me need not be mentioned. If I cannot think of something to repay you, in my entire life, I would have become a man in vain."

"Hmm," Hai Laogong mumbled, "If I cannot think of something to repay you, in my entire life, I would have become a man in vain." These words were said in icy cold tone. Listening to this, Wei Xiaobao could not restrain the hair on his back from rising up. But when he stole a glance toward Hai Laogong's face, he could not read the slightest bit of clue of what he was thinking.

"The old turtle is very formidable," Wei Xiaobao thought, "He knew early on that Xiao Xuanzi is the Emperor, but never revealed it the least bit. I must be very careful; if he knew that I caused his blindness, if I, Wei Xiaobao, can keep my own

eyes, then surely the Heavens do not have eyes."

The two of them faced each other silently. Half-step by half-step Wei Xiaobao crept toward the door. As soon as he saw Hai Laogong's face show ill-expression, he would bolt out the door and escape from the Palace, this time he would never come back. But he only heard Hai Laogong said, "Later on you must not use the `big grappling technique' against His Majesty. If the training of this kind of martial art continued, it would become a tendon-tearing, bone-snapping technique, it could dislocate joints and break people's muscles and bones; how can it be used against the Emperor?"

"Yes!" Wei Xiaobao replied.

Hai Laogong continued, "Starting today, I am going to teach you different skill, it is called the 'Great Compassion Great Sorrow Thousand-Leaf Hand'."

"The name is so strange," Wei Xiaobao said, "I have heard the 'great compassion great sorrow, helping the distress, Guanshiyin Pusa' [Goddess of Mercy, Avalokitesvara]."

"Have you seen the 'Thousand-hand Guanyin'?" Hai Laogong asked.

"The 'Thousand-hand Guanyin'?" Wei Xiaobao replied, "Yes, I have. Guanyin Pusa has so many hands. Each hand is holding different object, there is water bottle, there is a twig, and then a basket, a bell, it's very interesting."

"Did you see it in the temple at Yangzhou?" Hai Laogong asked.

"The temple at Yangzhou?" Wei Xiaobao said. This time his shock was really not a small matter. Like an arrow he darted toward the door, and was about to run outside.

Hai Laogong said, "In all the world, the 'Thousand-hand Guanyin' can only be found in the temple at Yangzhou. If you

have never been to the temple at Yangzhou, how can you see the 'Thousand-hand Guanyin'?"

Wei Xiaobao silently let out a deep breath, thinking, "Turns out only the temple at Yangzhou has the 'Thousand-hand Guanyin'; you scared the piss out of me." Hastily he said, "How can I go to Yangzhou? What kind of place is Yangzhou? Whatever the 'Thousand-hand Guanyin' is, I only heard it from others, I have never seen it. I was thinking of blowing my horn in front of you, Senior, bragging my knowledge, who would have thought you are experienced and knowledgeable, and was able to see through my big talk."

Hai Laogong sighed and said, "To expose a little smart-aleck's[52] big talk like yours is really not easy."

"It's easy, it's easy," Wei Xiaobao said, "If I say a sentence of lie, you, Senior, will expose it in less than an hour."

"Mmm," Hai Laogong mumbled, "Are you cold?" he asked, "Why don't you wear more clothes?"

"I am not cold," Wei Xiaobao said.

"Then how come your voice is a bit trembling?" Hai Laogong asked.

"There was a cold draft just a moment ago," Wei Xiaobao replied, "But now it's all right."

"The wind is strong by the door," Hai Laogong said, "Don't stand at the entrance."

"Yes, yes!" Wei Xiaobao replied, and walked several steps inside, but all along he did not dare to come close to Hai Laogong.

Hai Laogong said, “The 'Great Compassion Great Sorrow Thousand-Leaf Hand' is a Buddhist martial art, when used in a fight, it can control the opponent, but will not kill or harm

people; this is the most benevolent martial art in the world."

"This style of martial art will not kill or harm people," Wei Xiaobao said, "To be used in a fight against the Emperor, nothing is better than this."

"But this martial art is very difficult to learn," Hai Laogong said, "There are many outstanding styles, it won't be easy to memorize it thoroughly."

"Since there are many outstanding styles," Wei Xiaobao argued, "It doesn't matter if I cannot remember all; even if I have forgotten most, the remaining ones will still be not a few."

"Humph, lazy kid," Hai Laogong said, "You haven't even started, yet you are already nurturing the idea of laziness. In all your life, you can forget of ever mastering any excellent martial art skill."

"Yes, yes," Wei Xiaobao replied, "If I want to learn such a formidable martial art like you, Senior, have, in all my life naturally I will be like an old cat smelling a hanging salted fish, smells good, smells good[53]." While in his heart he said, "Even if I train so that my martial art skill is exactly the same as yours, in the end your eyes were still blinded by other people, and you old turtle are very happy about it?"

"Come over here," Hai Laogong said.

"Yes!" Wei Xiaobao replied, and took several steps forward, but he stopped several feet[54] away from Hai Laogong.

"Are you afraid I am going to eat you?" Hai Laogong said.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "My flesh is sour, it does not taste good."

Hai Laogong raised his left hand, suddenly he sent out a palm strike. Wei Xiaobao was shocked, he wanted to evade to the right, but suddenly, 'whack, whack!' his back was slapped twice,

immediately he knelt down and was unable to move. He frantically thought, “This is it, he … he is going to take my life away.”

Hai Laogong said, “This is the first move of the 'Great Compassion Great Sorrow Thousand-Leaf Hand', it’s called ‘South Sea Worships Buddha’. The two acupoints on your back are being sealed. But sealing acupoint is a very difficult technique to learn, plus you have to have good internal strength foundation. When fighting against His Majesty, you can’t possibly seal his acupoint for real and force him to kneel down in front of you. Just remember the technique, and go through the motion, performing the style, that should be enough.” As he said that, he reached down on Wei Xiaobao’s back and pressed on the two acupoints.

Immediately Wei Xiaobao’s limbs were able to move again. Calming his heart, he slowly stood up, while thinking, “Turns out the old turtle is teaching me martial art. He scared the wits out of me, I wonder if I will ever get it back.”

That day Hai Laogong taught him three moves, he said, “The first day is especially hard. Later on if you are diligent, you can learn many more moves.”

The next day Wei Xiaobao did not go gambling, shortly before noon he went to the small room where he usually have martial art match, and waited for Kangxi there. Knowing that the cakes, pastries and light snacks were supposed to be for the Emperor, he did not dare to pick up anything anymore. But after waiting for more than an hour, Kangxi still did not show up. “That’s right,” Wei Xiaobao mused, “Since fighting with me has lost its flavor, he does not want to play anymore.” Thereupon he went to the Upper Study Room.

The imperial bodyguard on duty outside the study room had seen Kangxi brought Wei Xiaobao to the clothes warehouse the previous day, he was familiar with Wei Xiaobao’s appearance,

knowing that he was the little eunuch whom the Emperor favored, and thus he did not stop him.

Entering the study room, Wei Xiaobao saw Kangxi was kicking a leather stool. He kicked again and again, with anger across his face, while repeatedly shouted, “Kick you to death, kick you to death!”

“Is he practicing a kicking skill?” Wei Xiaobao wondered in his heart. Not daring to interfere, he stood quietly on the side with hands hanging down.

After kicking for a while, Kangxi raised his head and saw Wei Xiaobao; with smile on his face he said, “I felt stifled, come play with me.”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Hai Laogong taught me new martial art technique, called the 'Great Compassion Great Sorrow Thousand-Leaf Hand', it is fiercer than the one he previously taught me, the ‘big grappling technique’. He said when I have mastered it, you won’t be my match for sure.”

“What kind of martial art is that?” Kangxi asked, “Show it to me.”

“Alright!” Wei Xiaobao said, “I am going to attack you!” Both of his palms flew up, ‘South Sea Worships Buddha’, ‘Gold and Jade Roof Tiles’, ‘Breath of Life’ altogether three moves were performed, fast and nimble, toward Kangxi’s back, shoulder, left side of his torso, right leg, and his throat, five points, which Wei Xiaobao lightly pat with his fingers. The changes of 'Great Compassion Great Sorrow Thousand-Leaf Hand' were quite peculiar, it was entirely different from the ‘big grappling technique’. Kangxi was caught off-guard and was not able to dodge a single move. Wei Xiaobao was using a very light force, so naturally Kangxi did not feel any pain. Actually, with Wei Xiaobao not having any internal energy, his physical strength was also very weak, even if they fight seriously, several hits

would not bring any harm. However, with one attack he successfully hit five times; it had never happened before.

"Ah!" Kangxi cried out in astonishment, "This martial art is very amazing. Come again tomorrow, I am going to ask *Shifu* to teach me an excellent martial art as well. We'll have another match."

"Excellent, excellent!" Wei Xiaobao said.

Returning to his residence, he recounted what Kangxi had said. Hai Laogong said, "I wonder what kind of martial art will his *Shifu* teach him. Today you are going to learn several more moves from the 'Thousand-Leaf Hand'."

That day Wei Xiaobao learned six moves, namely 'Watching Reflection in the Mirror', 'Catching the Moon in the Water', 'Floating Clouds Coming and Going', 'Water Bubble Vanishing and Reappearing', 'A Very Clear Dream', 'Emptiness After Realization'. These six moves were all very mysterious; they seemed to be hidden, yet in plain sight, the changes were unpredictable, without clear pattern, many fake attacks, a few real ones. Hai Laogong only wanted Wei Xiaobao to memorize the motion, without explaining the subtlety of the style, so much so that he did not even verify whether the execution of the style was proper, or the position of the move was perfect. First, Hai Laogong could not see, second, he hardly paid any attention.

Seeing how Hai Laogong was so casual in teaching him, Wei Xiaobao was secretly delighted. He mused, "You teach me carelessly, I also learn sloppily; the two of us can be considered going through this muddleheadedly together. If you want to take it seriously, *laozi* does not have idle time to accompany you playing."

The next day Wei Xiaobao went to the Upper Study Room, and saw there were four guards, which he had not seen before,

standing outside the door. While he was hesitating, one of the guards said with a smile, “Are you Gui Gong-gong? His Majesty ordered you to come in immediately.”

Wei Xiaobao was startled, “What Gui Gong-gong?” he mused, but then understood immediately, “*Laozi* is Gui Gong-gong! This imperial bodyguard knows I am the Emperor’s trusted aide, so he is particularly polite to me.” Thereupon he laughed and nodded his head, saying, “Fortunate meeting, fortunate meeting. May I ask the surnames of the four of you?” The four imperial guards told him their surnames and given names. Wei Xiaobao exchanged some pleasantries with them.

The guard surnamed Zhang laughed and said, “You’d better go in quickly, His Majesty has been asking about you several times.” Wei Xiaobao walked in.

Kangxi sprang up from the chair and laughed, “Your three moves yesterday, my *Shifu* has taught me how to counter them. Let us try it.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Since your *Shifu* said you are going to counter it, naturally you will counter it; there is no need to try.”

“We must try it!” Kangxi said, “You go quietly to our martial art match hall first, don’t let anybody know, I will come shortly.” Wei Xiaobao complied, and went to the small room. Kangxi had just learned a new set of skill, he was impatient to test it out, therefore, he arrived shortly afterwards.

The two of them fought immediately. Kangxi did indeed use ingenious technique, he managed to neutralize the three moves Wei Xiaobao launched the previous day, but still, Wei Xiaobao managed to land a palm strike on the back of his shoulder.

Seeing the brilliant moves Kangxi was displaying, Wei Xiaobao’s heart was also full of admiration; he asked, “This set of technique you are using, what is it called?”

Kangxi replied, “This is the ‘*Ba Gua*[55] Roaming Dragon Palm’. My *Shifu* said, your 'Great Compassion Great Sorrow Thousand-Leaf Hand' has too many styles, and is very troublesome to memorize. Our ‘Ba Gua Roaming Dragon Palm’ only has eight times eight, sixty-four styles, but changes repeatedly, so when used to the greatest extent, it may match your ‘Thousand-leaf Hand’.”

“Which one is superior?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“I also asked the same thing,” Kangxi said, “*Shifu* said that these two are equally excellent palm techniques, so it’s hard to say which one is superior. Whoever has profound power, and able to use it ingeniously, will win.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Yesterday I learned six more moves. You may try it.”

Right away he launched the six moves he learned yesterday. Although the second and third moves were completely forgotten, and the fifth move was executed incorrectly, Kangxi was still hit seven, eight times. Kangxi nodded and said, “These six moves of yours are amazing, I must learn how to counter them.”

Wei Xiaobao returned to his residence and told Hai Laogong how Kangxi had learned the ‘Ba Gua Roaming Dragon Palm’. Hai Laogong nodded his head and said, “As a matter of fact, our Shaolin Pai’s ‘Thousand-Leaf Hand', only Wudang Pai’s ‘Ba Gua Roaming Dragon Palm’ can be its match. His *Shifu* was not wrong. The palm techniques of our two Sects have their respective advantage; whoever master it better will be the more formidable one.”

“He is the Emperor,” Wei Xiaobao said, “How can I surpass him? Of course I’ll have to let him learn a good deal better.” He was unwilling to assiduously train martial art, and thus had arranged a good excuse for his falling behind.

Hai Laogong said, “If you are too disappointing, His Majesty won’t have any interest to spar with you.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “There is a saying: brilliant teacher will produce superior student, there are no poor soldiers under a capable general. You are a brilliant teacher, and also a capable general; the person you teach cannot be too disappointing. You are the Old Wang’an, releasing a hundred and twenty kind-hearted men!” [I am not sure about this, can’t find any reference.]

Hai Laogong shook his head, he said, “Don’t boast too much, the dishes on the table are getting cold, eat the bowl of soup first!”

“Let me serve you, Senior, the soup,” Wei Xiaobao said.

“I don’t eat the soup,” Hai Laogong said, “Each time I eat, I am coughing.”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao said. He took the soup by himself and mused, “I, the Senior, ate the soup and am not coughing.”

For the next several months, Kangxi and Wei Xiaobao learned their styles and had martial art contest. The two of them did not have any real fight, neither one of them exerted their full potential and strived with all their hearts to score victory, unavoidably the delight in fighting with everything they had had diminished greatly. The styles they were learning were getting more and more complicated, as were the techniques to counter them, and the variations within the styles. However, the match had turned into a cultured contest, just like a game of chess, not resembling any fight at all. Kangxi knew perfectly well that Wei Xiaobao would not dare to kick his butt fiercely, nor would he be comfortable to deliver a heavy blow on his head.

Wei Xiaobao only learned martial art to keep the Emperor company, he himself had no interest at all. He would learn new moves, and forget the previous ones. It was obvious that

Kangxi's *Shifu* was also rather negligent in teaching him. The two of them made an extremely slow progress, their interest in having a match was also greatly reduced. Later on, several days would pass before Kangxi would exchange a move with Wei Xiaobao.

During this time, other than having martial art match with Wei Xiaobao, Kangxi often took Wei Xiaobao to the study room to accompany him studying. The imperial bodyguards and the court eunuchs in the Palace all knew that the little eunuch from the Catering Department, Xiao Guizi, was now the Emperor's most favorite person. When they saw him, nobody dared to call his name 'Xiao Guizi' straight out, they always addressed him as Gui Gong-gong this and Gui Gong-gong that, and were very respectful and affectionate towards him.

Wei Xiaobao still wanted to win Hai Laogong's favor, each time he went to the Upper Study Room, he was always looking for the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra' for him, but after looking around everywhere, he was still unable to find it.

One particular day, after having a martial art match with Wei Xiaobao, with a serious expression Kangxi said in low voice, "Xiao Guizi, tomorrow we have a very important thing to do, come a bit earlier to the study room and wait for me."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao complied. He knew the Emperor did not like to talk too much, if he did not say what important thing was, he must not ask too much questions.

The next day he arrived at the study room early and waited. Kangxi said in low voice, "I want you to do something for me, do you have the courage?"

"You want me to do something, what is there for me to be afraid of?" Wei Xiaobao replied.

"This is a matter of utmost importance," Kangxi said, "If not handled properly, you and I will have our lives to worry."

Wei Xiaobao was rather alarmed, he said, “At most it is my life we are talking about; you are the Emperor, who dares to harm you? What’s more, with you watching over me, whatever I say will not put my life in jeopardy.” He thought that he must state it up front, that if I, Wei Xiaobao, has my life in jeopardy, you as the Emperor must be responsible, you cannot ignore me.

Kangxi said, “This Oboi is harsh and unreasonable, he is a rude bully, his heart has different scheme. Today we are going to deal with him, do you dare?”

Wei Xiaobao had lived in the Palace for quite a long time. Other than practicing martial art and accompanying Kangxi, he had very little time to enjoy himself. For the last several months Hai Laogong forbade him to gamble with the Wen brothers and the others, only occasionally did he manage to steal a game or two. Besides, his martial art match against Kangxi was getting more and more boring. While he was feeling stifled, hearing that they were going to deal with Oboi, he could not help but was delighted.

"Wonderful, wonderful!" he said, "I told earlier that the two of us join hands should take him. Even if he is the number one warrior of Manchuria, you and I have trained so much that our skill is not too bad, definitely we are not afraid of him."

Kangxi shook his head, "I am the Emperor," he said, "I can't fight with him personally. This Oboi is holding two consecutive jobs, he is a minister, but also the commander of the internal imperial bodyguards. All the imperial bodyguards in the Palace are his men. If he knew I am going to arrest him, most likely he would revolt. If all the imperial bodyguards join the action, you and I won't be able to protect our lives, even the Emperor's Grandmother and Empress Dowager may run into misfortune. Thus, this matter is really dangerous."

Striking his chest with his hand Wei Xiaobao said, "In that case I am going to wait for him outside the Palace, I'll catch him

off-guard, and stab him dead with a dagger. If the stab did not kill him, he wouldn't know it was your idea."

"This man's martial art skill is superb," Kangxi said, "Plus you are still little, you are not his match. Moreover, outside the Palace gate his bodyguards are numerous, you will have difficulty just to be near him. Even if you succeed in assassinating him, I am afraid you will also be killed by his bodyguards. I have another idea."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao said.

Kangxi continued, "Let's wait until he come over here to present his memorial, I will arrange several little eunuchs in advance to wait in here. When you see the teacup in my hand falls down, pounce on him and twist his hands behind his back. More than ten little eunuchs will then attack together, pulling his hands and legs, stopping him from using his martial art. If that is still not enough, I will have to come forward and help."

"This is a wonderful idea," Wei Xiaobao happily said, "Do you have a knife? We must not mess up this matter; if we fail to arrest him, I will simply kill him with the knife."

At first, after killing Xiao Guizi, he always kept a dagger in his boot; later on he found out that Xiao Xuanzi was the Emperor. During the exchange of palm strikes, oftentimes he had to jump and dodge, he was afraid the dagger would fall from his boot. Other than imperial bodyguards on duty, if anybody else was found carrying any blade, the crime was punishable by beheading; therefore, he did not dare to carry his dagger anymore.

Kangxi nodded, he pulled his desk drawer and took out a couple of golden-handled daggers. He gave one to Wei Xiaobao, and inserted the other one into his own boot. Wei Xiaobao also hid the dagger into his boot. He felt his blood surged, his body grew hot and his breathing quickened. "Good fellow," he said,

"We'll deal with him!"

Kangxi said, "Go get twelve little eunuchs here." Wei Xiaobao complied and went out to get the eunuchs.

These little eunuchs had been practicing tumbling and wrestling at the clothes warehouse for the last several months. Although they did not know any martial art, their skill in pulling hands and holding onto legs was not too bad. Kangxi said to the twelve little eunuchs, "You all have trained for several months, I don't know whether you are making progress or not. In a moment a senior minister will come in. This man is our dynasty's expert in tumbling and wrestling. I will let him testing your skill. As soon as you see me throwing down the teacup, attack him together. Catch him unaware with twelve against one. If you can hold him down and render him immovable, I will reward you heavily." After saying that, he pulled the drawer and drew out twelve *yuanbao*, worth fifty taels each. He said, "If you win, each one will receive one *yuanbao*, but if you lose, twelve heads will roll together. This bunch of lazy, useless fellows, why would I want to spare?" The last two sentences were said with stern voice and expression.

The twelve little eunuchs knelt down together and said, "Your servants will do our best to handle this matter for Your Majesty."

Kangxi laughed and said, "Handle what matter? I am only testing you, I want to see which one is diligent, which one is lazy."

Wei Xiaobao secretly admired him, "He did not reveal anything in front of the little eunuchs, to guard against these little demons lose their patience and reveal the secret plan in Oboi's presence."

After the little eunuchs withdrew, Kangxi picked up a book from the desk and started to read. Wei Xiaobao could hear him

reciting in low voice; unexpectedly his voice did not tremble, his hands did not shake. Confronted with an important event, he was as calm as ever; while Wei Xiaobao felt his hands were clammy, and his body was hot. He cursed himself secretly, "Wei Xiaobao, you are a son of a b1tch, this time you prove yourself to be inferior to Xiao Xuanzi. Your martial art skill is not as good as his, your mental power is also inferior to him." But then he thought, "He is the Emperor, naturally his courage is greater than mine. Nothing so special about it. If I were the Emperor, naturally I will surpass him." yet in the deepest part of his heart he knew it was hard to justify what he had just told himself.

A good half a day later, there was sound of boots outside the door, an imperial bodyguard announced, "Ao *Shaobao* desires to have an audience with the Emperor, wishing His Majesty ten thousand good fortune and peace like gold."

"Ao *Shaobao*, come in!" Kangxi said. Oboi raised the curtain and walked in. He knelt down and kowtowed.

Kangxi said with a laugh, " Ao *Shaobao*, you are just in time. I have here more than ten little eunuchs who have practiced wrestling. I heard that you are our Manchuria's warrior with number one martial art skill. How about you give directions to them for several stances?"

With a smile Oboi said, "Your Majesty has the desire, the Minister will serve with my ability."

Kangxi laughed and said, "Xiao Guizi, tell the imperial bodyguards outside to go take a break. They do not need to come back unless summoned." As he said that, he laughed toward Oboi and made a face. Oboi laughed aloud. Wei Xiaobao went out to do the bidding.

In a low voice Kangxi said, "Ao *Shaobao*, you advised me not to read Han people's books, I think you are very right. We'd better spend our time in the study room wrestling and having

fun, but don’t let other people hear about it. If the Empress Dowager finds out, she will force me to study.”

Oboi was delighted. “That’s right, that’s right, that’s right!” he repeatedly said, “Your Majesty’s idea is very brilliant. Those Han people books, what’s the use of reading them?”

Wei Xiaobao returned and said, “The imperial bodyguards thank Your Majesty for your kindness, they all have withdrawn.”

“Good,” Kang laughed, “Let us play. Little eunuchs, twelve of you form six pairs, spar with each other.”

The twelve little eunuchs rolled their sleeves and tightened their belts, they split into six pairs and attacked each other. Oboi watched with smile on his face; seeing these little eunuchs’ skill was only so-so, he shook his head and laughed. Kangxi picked up the teacup and drank a mouthful. He said with a laugh, “Ao *Shaobao*, do you think these children’s skill is useable?”

Oboi laughed and said, “To put up a show, they are passable!”

Kangxi laughed, “Compared to you, Ao *Shaobao*, naturally they are inadequate!” he said. He leaned sideways, his hand loosened, ‘crash!’ the teacup fell to the floor. “Aiyo!” he cried out.

Oboi was startled, he said, “Your Majesty …” the two words had just come out of his mouth, behind him the twelve little eunuchs pounced at him at the same time, pulling his hands and climbing onto his arms, wrapping their arms around his waist and holding on to his legs, attacking him from all sides.

Kangxi laughed aloud and said, " Ao *Shaobao*, pay attention!"

Oboi only knew the young Emperor was inciting the little eunuchs to test his martial art skill; with a smile he flung his arms, four little eunuchs fell down to the ground. He still did not dare to use too much force, for fear that he might injure the

little eunuchs. His left leg lightly swept, two more little eunuchs were swept down. He roared in laughter. The remaining little eunuchs remembered the Emperor's words, 'if you lose, twelve heads will roll together'; with everything they had they firmly hold on to Oboi's waist and legs.

Wei Xiaobao had already slipped behind him, aiming for the 'sun acupoint' on Oboi's temple, he sent out a ferocious punch. Oboi only felt a burst of dizziness in his brain; he was slightly angered, "These little eunuchs are very rude," he thought. With a swift sweep of his left arm he threw three little eunuchs away. But when he turned around, his chest was hit by Wei Xiaobao's fist. Although Wei Xiaobao's two sneak attacks could be considered very quick, his strength was lacking, so that although Oboi was hit on vital points, he did not suffer any serious harm.

Seeing the one launching the sneak attack was unexpectedly the little eunuch close to the Emperor, he had a vague feeling that things were worse than he thought, yet in the end he refused to believe that the Emperor was using these children to apprehend him. Stretching out his left palm, he pressed down on Wei Xiaobao's left shoulder. Wei Xiaobao used the move ‘Emptiness After Realization’, his left palm feigned two attacks in front of Oboi. As Oboi ducked, 'bang!' the pit of his stomach was squarely kicked. "Ah!" but it was Wei Xiaobao who cried out. What happened was that when his kick landed on Oboi's chest, he felt as if he was kicking a brick wall, he felt severe pain on his own leg instead.

Seeing Wei Xiaobao repeatedly using killer stances against him, Oboi was startled and angered. In the heat of the battle, he did not have time to think the Emperor's real intention; he only thought that as soon as he was able to extricate himself from the little eunuchs' entanglement, he would deal with Wei Xiaobao first. But the little eunuchs were holding fast to his

waist and legs, as soon as he managed to throw several eunuchs, the rest were pouncing at him.

Kangxi clapped his hands and laughed. "Ao *Shaobao*," he said, "I am afraid you are going to lose."

Oboi was about to crush the top of Wei Xiaobao's head with his fist, hearing Kangxi, he said in his heart, "So you just want to joke with me; how can I lower myself to these little children's level?" Deflecting his arm slightly and reducing his power, 'whack!' his punch landed on Wei Xiaobao's right shoulder with only one-tenth of his strength. But Oboi's strength was inexhaustible, it was said that during the battle with the Ming army, with his bare hands he was able to grab Ming's officers and soldiers and hurled them away randomly, just like a tornado sweeping away everything in its path.

Wei Xiaobao only learned martial art casually for several months, plus he was only a child; although he had a throng of little eunuchs to help him, how could he overcome him? When the punch landed, Wei Xiaobao staggered and tumbled forward. Seizing this opportunity, he sent out his left elbow to strike the small of Oboi's back.

Oboi laughed and cursed him, "You, this baby, are very crafty!" while lightly pushing Wei Xiaobao's back with his right hand. Wei Xiaobao hit the ground head first, but when he stood up, there was a dagger in his hand. Turning around swiftly, he pounced on Oboi.

Suddenly seeing the shining dagger in Wei Xiaobao's hand, Oboi was taken by surprise, he stared blankly for a moment then called out, “You … what are you doing?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “I use dagger, you use your bare hands, let us fight!”

“Quickly put the knife down!” Oboi barked, “In the presence of His Majesty, must not use any murder weapon.”

“Alright,” Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, “You want me to put it down, I’ll put it down.” Stooping down, he inserted the dagger into his boot.

By this time there were still seven, eight little eunuchs holding on firmly onto Oboi. Suddenly Wei Xiaobao dropped down, as if he had lost his footing; his body bumped into Oboi, the dagger went straight up, he wanted to stab Oboi’s belly. Unexpectedly Oboi had a quick reaction in facing danger; swiftly he shrank backward and the dagger stabbed his thigh. With a loud roar Oboi flung three little eunuchs and seized Wei Xiaobao’s neck.

Seeing Wei Xiaobao and the little eunuchs failed to hold Oboi down, Kangxi knew their situation was dire; circling toward Oboi’s back, he pulled his dagger and stabbed it toward Oboi’s back. Feeling the sting of pain on his back, Oboi quickly contracted the muscle on his back, Kangxi’s stab slipped; it did not hit any vital point. Without too much trouble Oboi fung Wei Xiaobao away, and turned around as swift as a whirlwind; he saw a young man before his eyes, which was precisely the Emperor.

Oboi was stunned; Kangxi jumped two steps back. Oboi let out another roar; at last he understood that the Emperor wanted to take his life. Shaking his fist in the air he pounced on Kangxi. Kangxi sidestepped, Oboi grabbed two little eunuchs and smashed their heads against each other. Two skulls immediately split open. Oboi sent out his left fist straight toward a little eunuch’s chest, followed by a fierce kick with his right leg, sending four little eunuchs crashing onto the wall. Their muscle torn, their bones broken; without even a grunt they all died instantly. Right away he raised his left leg to trample the abdomen of a little eunuch holding on to his right leg, the little eunuch’s stomach burst open and his intestines spilled out. In a split second he had successively killed eight eunuchs. The remaining four little eunuchs were so scared that they stared

blankly without knowing what to do.

With dagger in his hand Wei Xiaobao lunged forward. Oboi met him with his left fist. Wei Xiaobao felt a strong gust of wind assaulting his face so that he could not breathe. Brandishing the dagger, he attacked Oboi’s arm. Oboi slightly turned his arm to evade the dagger, immediately he sent another punch and hit Wei Xiaobao on the left shoulder, sending him flying over the desk and landed on the incense burner. Immediately the ashes from the censer flew up to the air.

From the beginning Kangxi was very calm and collected, he used the ‘Ba Gua Roaming Dragon Palm’ to fight Oboi, but Kangxi's power in using this palm technique was rather limited, plus he was fighting Oboi, a valiant military leader who was divinely brave by nature; in all honesty the palm technique did not have too much usefulness. Oboi was hit twice by Kangxi's palm, but he seemed hardly noticed it. Oboi sent out a left kick toward Kangxi's right leg. Kangxi staggered and fell forward. Oboi roared like thunder, he shouted, "Let us all die together!" Both fists came down on Kangxi's head.

Kangxi and Wei Xiaobao had been fighting each other for quite a long time, his ability to adapt to changes in the small room where they spar had been trained that he was able to react fast. Seeing Oboi's fists came, he dropped down at once and rolled away underneath the desk. With his left leg Oboi kick the desk, while with his right leg he repeatedly kicked on Kangxi's body. Suddenly a cloud of dust rose upward, a layer of ash covered Oboi's eyes.

Oboi let out a 'wah! wah!' cry, while frantically rubbed his eyes with both hands. His right leg kept kicking forward at lightning speed, for fear that the enemy would seize this opportunity to attack.

What happened was that when Wei Xiaobao saw the urgency of their situation, he grabbed two handfuls of ashes from the

incense burner and threw it toward Oboi. The particles of ashes from the incense was very fine, as soon as it made contact with Oboi's eyes, it quickly dispersed.

Suddenly Oboi felt a stabbing pain on his left arm; it was Wei Xiaobao's dagger that he threw, it was aimed toward the vital point on the pit of his stomach, but it hit his arm instead.

By this time the table in the study room was overturned and the stools lying on their sides, it was a complete chaos. Wei Xiaobao saw a chair behind Oboi, it was precisely the dragon chair the Emperor used on day-to-day basis. With all his might he picked up the bronze censer using both hands, jumped onto the dragon chair, aimed the censer on the back of Oboi's head, and smashed it down as hard as he could.

The censer was an object from the Tang dynasty, at least it weighed about thirty catties. Oboi's eyes were blinded, he could not evade. 'Bang!' the top of his head was hit. Oboi's body swayed and he tumbled down on the ground, fainted. The incense burner was cracked, unexpectedly Oboi's head remained intact.

Kangxi was ecstatic. "Xiao Guizi," he called out, "You've done it." He had prepared some cow tendon rope, which he busily took out from the drawer of the overturned desk. Together with Wei Xiaobao he bound Oboi's hands and feet.

Wei Xiaobao was so scared that his whole body was soaked in cold sweat, his limbs trembled, he pulled the rope, but felt that his strength was completely gone. Kangxi and Wei Xiaobao looked at each other, their joy was unspeakable.

Not too long afterwards Oboi came to his senses, he shouted, "I am a loyal minister, I am innocent! This is a conspiracy to harm me, I refuse to accept even to my death!"

"Traitor!" Wei Xiaobao sternly said, "You brought knife to the Upper Study Room, for that crime alone you deserve to die ten

thousand times."

"I did not bring any knife!" Oboi shouted.

Wei Xiaobao also shout harshly, "Aren't those two knives on your body? One on your back and the other on your arm. You still dare to say you did not bring any knife?" With Wei Xiaobao forcefully pushing his twisted logic, how could Oboi debate him? Much less the top of his head was smashed heavily with the bronze censer, his back and his arm were pierced by the knives; although his injuries were not life-threatening, they were not light either. In a moment of desperation, all he could do was shouting and screaming exasperatedly.

Seeing out of the twelve little eunuchs only four were left alive, Kangxi said, "You have seen it with your own eyes, this Oboi is rebelling against his superior, he is planning on assassinating me."

The four little eunuchs were still shaken, their faces were ashen. One of them repeatedly agreed, "Yes, yes!" The other three could not even utter a single word.

Kangxi said, "Get out now, proclaim my decree, summon Prince Kang Giyesu and Songgotu to come over here. Do not mention even one word of what has just happened. If there is any rumor leaked out, just watch your heads." The four little eunuchs complied and went out.

Oboi was still shouting defiantly, "Injustice, injustice! The Emperor is personally trying to kill me, a loyal minister. If the former Emperor found out, he would never spare you!"

Kangxi's countenance sank, he said, "Think of a way, don't let him sprout nonsense!"

"Yes!" Wei Xiaobao complied. He walked over and stretched out his left hand to pinch Oboi's nose. Oboi opened his mouth to take a breath, with his right hand Wei Xiaobao tore off the dagger from Oboi's arm and stabbed randomly into Oboi's

mouth several times. He also grabbed two handfuls of incense ashes from the ground and stuffed it inside Oboi's mouth. Oboi's throat created some gurgling noise, he was chocked and was barely able to breathe, how could he say another word?

Wei Xiaobao also pulled the dagger piercing Oboi's back and stuck both daggers side by side on the desk, while he himself stood guard by Oboi's side. If he saw the Oboi making the slightest movement, he would immediately pull out the dagger and stab him several times.

Seeing the important matter had reached its conclusion, in his heart Kangxi was very happy. To see Oboi's impressive build and his mean and ferocious expression with bloodstain all over his face, he could not help but secretly alarmed and scared; he realized now that he had been too reckless, by only relying on he and Xiao Guizi, who had learned martial art for only so long, plus twelve little eunuchs, who had just started training wrestling, he was determined to deal with Oboi. He had never thought that dealing with a genuine warrior, several children would be completely useless; besides, his own martial art skill, as well as Xiao Guizi's, was nowhere near the expert level. If it was not for Xiao Guizi's ruse, right now he would have been killed by Oboi. Once Oboi made his move, he would stop at nothing; most likely he would also harm the Emperor's Grandmother and the Empress Dowager. All the ministers of the dynasty, as well as the imperial bodyguards inside the Palace, were his trusted aides. If Oboi set up another young ruler, no one would dare to inquire about his crime. Thinking to this point, he could not help but shivered.

After waiting for quite some time, Prince Kang and Songgotu who were summoned by the four little eunuchs came in. As soon as they entered the Upper Study Room, they saw dead bodies sprawled all around with bloodstain scattered everywhere; to say that they were mildly shocked was

definitely an understatement. They knelt down immediately and kowtowed repeatedly, while proclaimed together, "Wishing Your Majesty ten thousand good fortune and peace like gold."

Kangxi said, "Oboi committed treason and heresy, he brought a blade into the Palace, he dared to assault me. Fortunately our ancestors protected me; the little eunuch Xiao Guizi, with the help of other eunuchs, strenuously resisted the ominous rebel, and arrested him. On how to deal with the aftermath, I leave it to you to do as you see fit."

Prince Kang and Songgotu had never gotten along well with Oboi, they had been under Oboi's oppression for a long time; suddenly seeing a big change in the Palace, they were pleasantly surprised. After paying their respect to the Emperor again, they admitted that they had neglected to take precautions, that they had committed grave offense, that fortunately the Emperor was blessed with flood of good fortune filled the heavens, that the Emperor was cherished by hundreds of deities, such that Oboi's vicious scheme was thwarted.

Kangxi said, "This matter of assassination attempt, you do not need to mention it to outsiders, to avoid Empress Grandmother and Empress Dowager being startled. If this matter is spread out, the Han officials and the common people will laugh at us. Oboi's crime is great, even without today's matter, he deserved to be punished a long time ago."

Prince Kang and Songgotu kowtowed again, "Yes, yes!" they said. Yet in their hearts they had doubts, "Oboi is divinely brave by nature, he is our Manchu's number one warrior. If he really wanted to assassinate the Emperor, how could several little eunuchs capture him? There must be something else in this matter." Luckily the two of them were eager to heavily punish Oboi, so they did not see any reason to inquire deeper into the story. Much less the Emperor had said so, who would dare to question him?

Prince Kang said, "Reporting to Your Majesty: Oboi has too many henchmen, we must spread the net and capture them all, to guard against another rebellion. Let Official Songgotu stay here to protect Your Majesty; he must not leave your Holy Self even for half a step. Your servant will relay the decree, all Oboi's henchmen must be arrested at once. What does Your Majesty think?"

Kangxi nodded. "Very well!" he said. Prince Kang withdrew.

Songgotu looked up and down Xiao Guizi, sizing him up, he said, "Xiao Gong-gong, your meritorious deed in protecting His Majesty today is indeed not small."

"It was His Majesty's good fortune," Xiao Guizi said, "As slaves, what meritorious service can we possibly do?"

Kangxi was very pleased to see Wei Xiaobao did not claim credit for himself at all, and did not mention even a word of the violent battle just now; he thought that if his personal involvement by stabbing Oboi from the back was ever spread outside, as the ruler, he would lost considerable respect. He also mused, "Xiao Guizi's merit today big beyond compare, it could be said that he had saved my life. It's a pity that he is an eunuch, no matter how I promote him, he will always be an eunuch. Our ancestor has set up a strict rule that an eunuch must not be involved in politics; apparently I can only reward him generously with money."

Prince Kang handled the matter very rapidly; he was back in a short time, leading several trusted royalties and senior ministers to pay their respect to the Emperor, reporting that most of Oboi's party had been arrested, all guilty imperial bodyguards inside the Palace had been sent outside on imperial orders, not even one was left. Then he requested the Emperor to assign another minister to preside over the imperial

bodyguards, and to elect another trusted team of personal bodyguards.

Kangxi was greatly delighted, "You have managed it very well!" he said.

The several Princes and civil and military ministers saw the devastation in the Upper Study Room, how Oboi had killed the eight little eunuchs that their skulls disintegrated and their brains scattered, their intestine spilled and their bones broken; no one was not horrified, they all raised up their voices to curse Oboi's treason and heresy. Immediately the head of the Ministry of Justice personally led Oboi away to be detained. The Princes and Ministers also said many other praise and respectful wishes to the Emperor before taking their leave to discuss among themselves what to do with Oboi's crime.

Prince Kang Giyesu conveyed Kangxi's intention by urging them, "His Majesty is benevolent and filial, he does not wish to massacre too many people and alarm the Emperor's Grandmother and the Empress Dowager; therefore, the matter of Oboi committed treason and heresy does not need to be exposed outside the imperial court. He will only be charged with dominating the government, with being illegally harsh and unreasonable, so we must make a list of detailed charges." All the princes, dukes and ministers raised their voices to praise the sage's virtue.

Assassinating the Emperor was not a small matter, without a doubt Oboi would have been put to death by dismemberment[56], along with his entire family, young and old, women and children, as well as the family members of those associated with him, and all his clansmen; no one would be lucky enough to escape with their lives. If this major case was pursued down, the implication would be widespread, at least several thousand people would have to die. Although

Kangxi hated Oboi's dominance, he did not wish to heap random accusation on his head, he was even more unwilling to implicate the innocents.

Kangxi’s days of being personally in-charge of the government was not lacking, however, all government affairs, big and small, were handled by Oboi; all along the court officials were only doing what Oboi directed them to do. Today he had arrested Oboi; he saw that the princes, dukes and ministers’ expression was different all of a sudden, he could see that they were a lot more respectful and submissive to him. It was only this time that Kangxi finally felt the joy of being the ruler. He also took a glance at Wei Xiaobao, and saw that he had withdrawn into a corner, without saying anything. Kangxi thought, “This kid does not talk too much, he is very perceptive.”

After the Ministers had all withdrawn, Songgotu said, “Your Majesty, the Upper Study Room must be cleaned up properly. May I suggest Your Majesty take the trouble of withdrawing to your personal palace [orig. ‘palace to lie down’] to rest?”

Kangxi nodded. Accompanied by Prince Kang and Songgotu he headed toward his personal palace. Wei Xiaobao was unsure if he should follow; while he was hesitating, Kangxi nodded to him and said, “You may come with me.”

Prince Kang and Songgotu took their leave several hundred steps outside the personal palace. Other than imperial wives and concubines, princes, court eunuchs and palace maids, outer ministers must not set their feet into the inner courtyard of the Imperial Palace.

Wei Xiaobao followed Kangxi inside. At first he thought that the Emperor's personal palace would be filled with gold and jade in glorious splendor, that everything would be inlaid with emerald and white jade, that there would be at least two, three thousand pearls on the wall so that there would not be any need of lantern at night. Who would have thought that as he

entered the personal palace, it looked like an ordinary room, only the bedding and pillow cases were made of yellow silk, embroidered with dragon and phoenix, nothing more than that. He was quite disappointed, thinking, "Compared to the rooms in our Yangzhou's Spring Courtyard, the style here is far too inferior."

Kangxi drank a bowl of ginseng soup presented by a palace maid; he let out a long sigh and said, "Xiao Guizi, come with me to see the Empress Dowager." By this time Kangxi had not married yet, his personal palace was not too far away from the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful where the Empress Dowager resided.

When they reached the Empress Dowager's personal palace, Kangxi went in alone, he told Wei Xiaobao to wait outside. Wei Xiaobao waited for a long time and was bored; he mused, "I learned the 'Great Compassion Great Sorrow Thousand-Leaf Hand' Hai Laogong taught me, His Majesty learned the ‘Ba Gua Roaming Dragon Palm’, but when we fought Oboi today, any 'Thousand-Leaf Hand' or ‘Roaming Dragon Palm’ were all useless. It was only because of Little White Dragon Wei Xiaobao's third-class trick of scattering the incense ash and smashing the censer did we accomplish our mission successfully. There won't be any more fun in continuing learning those martial art skills. I always pretend to be an eunuch in the imperial palace, kowtowing to Xiao Xuanzi; it's really boring. Oboi is already arrested, Xiao Xuanzi does not need my help anymore. Tomorrow I'll slip out of the palace and won't be coming back."

While he was contemplating on how to leave the Palace, an eunuch came out and said with a laugh, "Gui *Xiongdi*, Empress Dowager orders you to come in."

"His granny," Wei Xiaobao cursed in his belly, "More kowtow! Why don't you, hot piece mama Empress Dowager, kowtow to

laozi?" But he said respectfully, "Yes!" and followed the eunuch inside.

Passing through two big courtyards, the eunuch stopped outside a door curtain and said, "Reporting to Empress Dowager: Xiao Guizi is here for an audience." Gently lifted the curtain, he puckered his mouth.

Wei Xiaobao walked in; there was another curtain ahead. This time the curtain was made entirely of strung pearls, it emitted a soft glow. A palace maid lifted up the pearl curtain. Wei Xiaobao went in with bowed head, but he raised his eyelids slightly, and saw a noble looking woman, approximately thirty years of age, was sitting on a chair. Kangxi was standing by her side. Obviously this woman was the Empress Dowager. Immediately he knelt down and kowtowed.

The Empress Dowager smiled and nodded, "Arise!" she said. Waiting for Wei Xiaobao to stand up, she said, "I heard from the Emperor that in the arrest of that rebel minister Oboi today you have rendered a great merit."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Reporting to Empress Dowager, your servant only knows of red-bellied devotion in protecting my master. Whatever His Majesty commanded, your servant would simply follow the imperial order. Your servant is young, he does not understand anything." He lived in the Palace for only several months, but during the gambling he often heard the eunuchs mentioning the rules and customs of the Palace and imperial court, which he memorized it one by one; he knew masters were most jealous of slaves who claim credit for himself. The bigger merit you render, the least credit you should pretend to claim, then your master would be very pleased with you. Supposing the servant showed a somewhat haughty attitude, the master might bestow a fatal disaster. If the master was irritated and thus loathe the servant, it would not be difficult at all for the servant to lose the favor and the good

fortune from the master.

The way he replied had pleased the Empress Dowager very much; she said, "Your age might be young, yet you are sensible, you are better than that Junior Protector [Shao Bao], who was granted the title first class martial artist, Oboi. Child, what do you think we should reward him with?"

Kangxi said, "Empress Dowager, please give your instruction."

The Empress Dowager muttered, "In the Catering Department, you don't have any rank, do you? Hai Tianfu, Supervisor Hai is an eunuch of the fifth grade, so I grant you the sixth grade, I promote you to be Eunuch Leader, you may serve as the Emperor's attendant!"

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Hot piece mama's sixth grade, seven grade, is the same as making me a grade of eunuch, *laozi* does not want it." But his face was all smiles as he knelt down and kowtowed, "Thank you for Empress Dowager's grace, thank you for His Majesty's grace."

The Qing Palace's common practice was to have fourteen Eunuch Managers, eight Eunuch Assistant Managers, a hundred and eighty nine Eunuch Leaders, and unlimited number of ordinary eunuchs. At the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, there were more than a thousand eunuchs, later, the number grew to more than two thousand eunuchs. The highest level of eunuch with managerial duty was fourth grade, the lowest was eighth grade, ordinary eunuchs did not have any rank. Wei Xiaobao was promoted from without any grade to the sixth grade eunuch; within the Palace, it could be considered a very rare honor.

The Empress Dowager nodded and said, "Do your duty well."

"Yes, yes!" Wei Xiaobao repeatedly declared. He stood up and withdrew by walking backward. When the palace maid raised the pearl curtain, Wei Xiaobao stole a glance toward the

Empress Dowager. He saw her complexion to be extremely pale, her eyes were bright, but her eyebrows were creased, as if she was concerned about something, or perhaps she had a load on her mind; he mused, “She is the Empress Dowager, what makes her unhappy? Ah, that’s right, her husband is dead, even if she is the Empress Dowager, with her husband dead, naturally she is not happy.”

Returning to his residence, he recounted everything that happened that day to Hai Laogong. Unexpectedly Hai Laogong did not show the least bit of surprise; he said drily, “I suspected he would make his move within these two days. His Majesty’s patience is much better than the late emperor’s.”

Wei Xiaobao was greatly astonished, “Gong-gong,” he asked, “You already know?”

“How can I know?” Hai Laogong said, “I have my suspicion for some time. His Majesty learning wrestling can be considered a child having some fun, but when he wanted thirty little eunuchs to also learn wrestling, what was he trying to do? His Majesty attentively learned the ‘Ba Gua Roaming Dragon Palm’, obviously he had some other reason behind it. If these two different paths martial art, the 'Great Compassion Great Sorrow Thousand-Leaf Hand' and the ‘Ba Gua Roaming Dragon Palm’ were trained for ten years, eight years to the point of proficiency, with the two of you join hands, there is a chance you could cope with Oboi. But what good is such tactless and impulsive person who learned only for two, three months? Ay, young people are courageous, but do not know the immensity of heaven and earth. Today’s matter was too dangerous.”

Wei Xiaobao leaned over to look at Hai Laogong, his heart was brimming with amazement and respect, “This old turtle’s eyes are blind, but he has foresight in everything.”

“Did His Majesty take you to see the Empress Dowager?” Hai Laogong asked.

“Yes!” Wei Xiaobao said, he thought, “You know about it too.”

“What reward did the Empress Dowager bestow to you?” Hai Laogong asked.

“It was nothing,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “She only gives me a sixth grade, promoting me to be Eunuch Leader.”

Hai Laogong chuckled and said, “That’s very good, you are only a grade lower than me. To be promoted from little eunuch to Eunuch Leader, I had to toil for no less than thirteen years.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “One of these days I am going to leave. You have taught me not a few of martial art skill, yet it was me who blinded your eyes. Unavoidably I owe you something, so I have to steal those several sutras for you. I cannot not steal it.”

Hai Laogong said, “You have rendered a great merit today, hereafter it will be easier for you to go to the Upper Study Room …”

Wei Xiaobao said, “That’s right, it will be easier for me to take that ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’. Gong-gong, your eyes are greatly inconvenienced, why do you want to have this sutra?”

Hai Laogong gloomily said, “You’re right, I am blind, I cannot read the sutra, you … you can read it for me, you can keep me company for the rest of your life, for … for the rest of your life you can read this ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’ for me …” As he said that, he suddenly coughed violently.

Seeing the way he stoop down and cough violently, Wei Xiaobao could not help having pity on him, he mused, “This old … old man is really strange.” Originally he had always referred to Hai Laogong as the ‘old turtle’, but this moment he could not bear to call him ‘old turtle’.

That night Hai Laogong did not stop coughing, so that even in his dream Wei Xiaobao was still hearing his cough.

The next day Wei Xiaobao went to the Upper Study Room to

wait upon the Emperor. He noticed that the imperial bodyguards on duty outside the study room were all new. As soon as Kangxi arrived, Prince Kang Giyesu and Songgotu also came in to submit a report, saying that the team of princes, dukes and senior ministers who were handling this case had already investigated and found that Oboi was guilty of thirty charges.

Kangxi was rather taken aback. “Thirty charges?” he said, “That many?”

Prince Kang said, “Oboi has committed grave offenses; actually, he did not stop at these thirty, however, your servants have received Your Majesty’s sacred command, so we managed this investigation leniently.”

“So be it,” Kangxi said, “What are those thirty?”

Prince Kang produced a sheet of white paper and read, “Oboi took unfair advantage of his mater and arrogate power, crime one. He appointed a clique of traitors, crime two. He formed a clique to control politics, crime three. He amassed wealth to support rebellion, crime four. He manipulated statement of confession, crime five. Without authority he promoted people like Marsai, whom the late emperor would not employ, crime six. Without authority he murdered Suksaha and the others, crime seven. Without authority he murdered Sunahai and the others, crime eight. He protected his cronies of the same Banner, by forcefully taking over land, crime nine. He was irreverent to the Holy Mother, crime ten.” He continued reading down one by one, until reaching the thirtieth major crime, which was ‘because other people’s grave was obstructing his own house’s *fengshui*, he ordered it to be moved’.

Kangxi said, “Turns out Oboi has committed these many evil deeds. How do you propose he should be sentenced?”

Prince Kang replied, “Oboi’s crime is great, his evil is extreme, he should be executed by lingering death, yet the ministers are

considering Your Majesty's sacred desire to show benevolence and mercy, thus we are proposing to depose him and execute him by beheading. Other members of his clique, Ebilun, Bambursan and Asiha[57], should also be beheaded."

Kangxi pondered over it and said, "Although Oboi's crime is great, he was an executive minister who has served for many years; he may be exempted from execution. He will be deposed and held in custody without parole, his family properties will be confiscated. As for the other members of his clique, you may do according to your proposal, execute them by beheading."

(Book note: According to the 'Draft History of the Qing Dynasty (compiled under Zhao Erxun in 1927 during the Northern Warlords period), Divine Ancestor's biographic sketch of an emperor': In his eighth year, Kangxi was already aware of Oboi's despotic corrupt politics, especially considering his far-reaching power which was difficult to control; and thus he picked Bai Tang'a, a vigorous young imperial bodyguard, to do the pouncing and striking. The day Oboi appeared, he led a group of imperial bodyguards to strike and bind him; hence completely subdued him and took him under control of the inner ministerial circle. In the year 1680 Minister Wang suggested that Oboi be imprisoned and charged with thirty major crimes, and asked that his entire family be executed. The imperial edict said: 'Oboi rebelled out of ignorance, he deserves to have his entire clan exterminated. Considering his long duration of service and repeated outstanding military merit, he is pardoned from death, but will have his properties confiscated and he is taken into custody.')

Prince Kang and Songgotu knelt down and kowtowed, "Holiness[58] is benevolent and merciful, even the Ming rulers of old all fall short."

That day the cabinet ministers appeared before Kangxi; they

were busy dealing with Oboi and the members of his clique. The ministers presented to Kangxi in details the power struggle between the Bordered Yellow Banner and the Plain White Banner. Wei Xiaobao was listening, but he did not have any clue what was happening. All he knew was that Oboi was the Banner Commander of the Bordered Yellow Banner, while Suksaha was the Banner Commander of the Plain White Banner. The two banners had been fighting over fertile and beautiful land, just like water against fire. After Suksaha was put to death by Oboi, a lot of wealth, estate and farmlands affiliated with the Plain White Banner were merged into the Bordered Yellow Banner's property. And now the Plain White Banner ministers beseeched the Emperor to restore everything to the original state.

Kangxi said, "You may reach an agreement among yourselves and report to me afterwards. Bordered Yellow Banner is one of the three upper banners, although Oboi is guilty, I cannot let the entire banner suffer the setback. In everything we must be fair and just."

The ministers kowtowed and said, "Your Majesty is enlightened sage, all the people of Bordered Yellow Banner have received holy graciousness."

Kangxi nodded, "You may leave," he said, "I want Songgotu to remain, I have another instruction for him."

When everybody else had left, Kangxi said to Songgotu, "After Suksaha was put to death by Oboi, was all his family property seized by Oboi?"

Songgotu replied, "Suksaha's farmland and estate have not entered into the inner warehouse, but Oboi has personally led his men to search Suksaha's home; gold, silver, jewels and valuable things had all entered Oboi's personal pouch."

"I expect as much," Kangxi said, "I want you to go to Oboi's home and take a look, verify his family property, if there is

anything that originally belongs to Suksaha, return it to his heir."

"Your Majesty's holy graciousness is vast and mighty," Songgotu said. Seeing that Kangxi did not say anything else, he slowly drew back toward the study room's door.

Kangxi said, "The Empress Dowager has an order: the Senior likes to pray to Buddha and read sutras, we heard that both the Banner Commanders of Plain White Banner and Bordered Yellow Banner have a copy of 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra' in their possession …"

As soon as he heard the five words 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra', Wei Xiaobao was jolted. He heard Kangxi continue, "These two Buddhist texts are sheathed in silk pouches, the Plain White Banner's copy in plain white silk, the Bordered Yellow Banner's copy in yellow silk with red border. The Empress Dowager says the Senior wants to see if these two copies are identical to the Buddhist text in the Palace. When you are going through Oboi's family property, see if you can find it."

"Yes, yes," Songgotu said, "Your servant will see to it." He knew the Emperor was young, yet he had a strong filial piety to the Empress Dowager. In important matters of the court politics, if the Empress Dowager had something to say, the Emperor would not disobey even a single one of her order. The Empress Dowager's order is more urgent than the Emperor's business. Looking for two Buddhist books was certainly easy, he thought he should be able to manage it quickly.

Kangxi said, "Xiao Guizi, come with him. When you find the sutras, the two of you can bring them back together."

Wei Xiaobao was delighted and hastily complied, he thought how Hai Laogong had wanted him to steal the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra', but it had been more than half a year, in the end not only he had never seen what kind of sutra the book was, he

had not even seen half a shadow of the book. This time he was under the imperial order to fetch the sutras, he was confident he would find the sutras. It would be best if Oboi had three copies at his home, then he would be able to fish in troubled water and embezzle a copy to be given to Hai Laogong; that would make him very happy.

Songgotu noticed that Xiao Guizi was the little eunuch close to the Emperor whom he doted very much, who, in the arrest of the traitor this time, had rendered great merit. He thought that fetching two copies of Buddhist sutras was not a big deal, so there was no need to send this eunuch. But then he had another thought and it suddenly dawned on him: “Of course, His Majesty wants to give him some benefit. Oboi has been in power for many years, the amount of gold, silver and valuables in his home must be beyond counting. His Majesty is sending me to search and confiscate his home, that is indeed a very lucrative assignment. In this matter I did not have the slightest contribution, why would he want me to get rich? His Majesty is sending Xiao Guizi to accompany me fetching the sutras, in reality he wants him to take a look. Searching and confiscating Oboi’s property is this little eunuch’s business, the Ol’ Songgotu is just secondary. If this business went awry, I would be greatly inconvenienced.”

Songgotu’s father was Sonin, the chief of four Executive Ministers when Kangxi fist took over the government. After Sonin’s death, Songgotu was promoted to be a junior minister in the personnel office. At that time Oboi was domineering the court, Songgotu did not dare to oppose him, hence he resigned from his post at the personnel office and took position as a first class imperial bodyguard. Kangxi knew that he and Oboi did not get along with each other, and thus this time he send him on a very serious assignment.

The two of them went out the Palace gate, Songgotu’s

attendant pulled a horse for him to ride on. Songgotu said, “Gui Gong-gong, please mount the horse first!” He assumed this little eunuch did not know how to ride, so he was prepared to look after him a bit, making sure that he would not fall and break his neck. Who would have thought that after several months of martial art training in the Palace, although Wei Xiaobao did not make any real progress, his hands and feet became very agile; plus in the past Mao Shiba had taught him some riding technique, so this time he no longer was ‘Zhang Guolao riding donkey, Wei Xiaobao riding a horse’[59], he nimbly leaped onto the horseback and unexpectedly his riding was very stable.

The two of them arrived at Oboi’s mansion. Oboi’s entire household, from top to bottom, no exception, had been arrested early on. The gates, front and rear, were under strict guard. “Gui Gong-gong,” Songgotu said to Wei Xiaobao, “If you see anything interesting, do not hesitate to take it. His Majesty is sending you here to fetch Buddhist sutra, it is to reward your great merit, no matter what you take, His Majesty will not ask about it.”

Wei Xiaobao saw in Oboi’s mansion, jewels, treasures and amusing things were everywhere, his eyes were dazzled. He felt that each object was better than the other. Compared to the utensils, curios or furniture in the Lovely Spring Courtyard at Yangzhou, it was as far as the heavens from the earth. At first he wanted to take everything, but looking at this thing he thought it was very amusing, looking at that thing he found it was more fascinating, he could not decide which one was better. He also recalled that in a few days he would slip away from the Palace anyway, if he took too many things, it would only inconvenience him to carry it, so he decided to take only a few especially valuable things.

Songgotu’s clerk started to take inventory of the articles, he

duly noted every single one on his list. When Wei Xiaobao picked up a pearl to look at it, the clerk would strike this pearl from his list, to state that in Oboi's mansion there was no such pearl existed. When Wei Xiaobao shook his head and put the pearl down, the clerk would add the pearl back into the list.

When they were still going through the inspection, suddenly they heard an officer's quick steps coming out. After paying his respect to Songgotu and Wei Xiaobao, he said, "Reporting to two *Daren*: we found a secret treasure-trove inside Oboi's bedroom; lowly officer did not dare to open without authority, please two *Daren* take the trouble to inspect it."

"Secret treasure-trove?" Songgotu happily asked, "That's strange indeed." He also asked, "Have you found those two sutras?"

The officer replied, "We did not find a single book in this house, only several dozens of accounting books. lowly officer are still searching diligently."

Pulling Wei Xiaobao's hand along, Songgotu entered Oboi's bedroom. He saw tiger skin and leopard skin spread on the floor; the walls were packed with bows, arrows, sabers and swords, it was a typical rough Manchurian warrior's bedroom. The secret treasure-trove was actually inside a hole beneath the floor, with an iron panel covering it. A tiger skin lay on top of the iron panel. By now the tiger skin and the iron panel had been opened, two guards were standing on either side of the hole. Songgotu said, "Take it out so we can take a look."

The two guards jumped into the hole and hauled the hidden things inside up. Two clerks took them over and carefully lay them down on a piece of leopard skin. Songgotu laughed and said, "Oboi's best treasure is obviously hidden inside this hole. Gui Gong-gong, you should pick your most beloved treasure here, I guarantee you won't make a mistake."

Wei Xiaobao laughed, “There is no need to be polite,” he said, “You yourself should also choose some.” He had just finished speaking when suddenly “Ah!” he exclaimed, as he saw the guard handed over a large white-jade box, five cinnabar red large characters were inscribed on top of the box, the first three characters were ‘forty-two’ [si shi er]. Wei Xiaobao hastily received the box, open the jade lid, and saw a thin book inside. The book was inside a white silk envelope, the same five characters were written on the seal. “Suo[60] *Daren*,” he asked, “Is this the ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’? I know the word ‘forty-two’, but I don’t know the characters ‘chapter’ and ‘sutra’.”

“Yes, yes,” Songgotu happily replied, “This is the ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “These two characters ‘chapter’ and ‘sutra’ are very difficult to recognize. Actually, I don’t need to think hard to recognize the characters, as long as there are five characters together, and the first three are ‘forty-two’, then the last two characters must be ‘chapter’ and ‘sutra’.”

Songgotu mused, “That’s not necessarily true,” but with a smile on his face he said, “Exactly.”

Then the guard handed over another jade box, with a book inside, but the envelope was made of yellow silk, with red silk border on the side. Both books looked very old. But inside the treasure-trove there was no third jade box, Wei Xiaobao was secretly very disappointed.

Songgotu delightedly said, “Gui Gong-gong, the two of us completed this task, Empress Dowager will be very happy, she will reward us handsomely.”

“What kind of sutra are those?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “I want to have a look.” As he said that, he opened one of the envelopes.

Songgotu's heart was stirred, "Gui Gong-gong," he said with a laugh, "I have something to say, but please don't be angry."

Ever since he was little, at the brothel Wei Xiaobao had always been bossed around; names like 'little animal' or 'little turtle' had never ceased being thrown at him. But when he obtained Kangxi's favor, whenever somebody, no matter who, saw him in the Palace, they were exceptionally polite to him. He was only a thirteen, fourteen years old boy, yet in all his life, when did he ever receive such respect? Here was Songgotu at Oboi's mansion, his prestige was spread over eight directions, whenever any civil or military officer see him, they were all trembling with fear, yet this man was so courteous toward him; Wei Xiaobao could not help but greatly enjoy it and he had an even better impression of Songgotu. He said, "Whatever instruction Suo *Daren* has, please just say it."

Songgotu laughed and said, "I don't dare to have any instruction, it's just that I suddenly remember something. Gui Gong-gong, these two sutras are wanted by the Empress Dowager and His Majesty, Oboi kept them in a secret treasure-trove, apparently they are not ordinary books. Just how important they are, we may not understand. I also very much want to take a look, but I am afraid there is something of utmost importance, involving great responsibility, written in them. The Empress Dowager may not like it if we as the servants see it. This … this … hee hee …"

As soon as he said that, Wei Xiaobao realized immediately. He was secretly frightened. Hastily he put the book back on the table and said, "You are extremely right, you are extremely right! Suo *Daren*, thank you for your direction. I did not understand this logic before, and almost attract great calamity."

Songgotu laughed and said, "Why did Gui Gong-gong say such words? His Majesty sends the two of us together to handle this matter. Your business is also mine, why do you make such

distinction between you and me? If I do not consider Gui Gong-gong as one of my own, I would not dare to casually say those words."

Wei Xiaobao said, "You are a high-ranking official, I … I … am a little … little eunuch, how can you consider me as one of your own?"

Songgotu waved his hand to the numerous officers in the room and said, "Wait for us outside."

The numerous officers bowed and said, "Yes, yes!" and they withdrew outside.

Songgotu pulled Wei Xiaobao's hand and said, "Gui Gong-gong, you must never ever said those words again. If you would consider me, Ol' Songgotu worthy, what do you say the two of us pay obeisance and become sworn brothers?" He said those words very earnestly.

Wei Xiaobao was startled. "I … I become sworn brother with you?" he said, "How … how can I deserve it?"

"Gui *Xiongdi*," Songgotu said, "If you say those words again, you are clearly deriding me. I don't know why, but as soon as I saw you, I feel there is a predestined affinity. The two of us go to the worship hall and swear brotherhood, and then we will become like real siblings. You and I will not announce it to outsiders, as long as nobody else know, what's the harm in doing it?" Gripping Wei Xiaobao's hand tightly, his eyes showed a fervent expression.

Actually, Songgotu was an extremely shrewd person; seeing the fall of Oboi, he knew there would be great power shift among the senior ministers of the imperial court. This time the Emperor seemed to be very well-disposed to him, it appears that someday he would get a promotion. To be an official in the imperial court, if he wanted to be in the Emperor's good graces, he must understand the Emperor's temper and mood. This little

eunuch was by the Emperor's side from morning to evening, if he could say a few good words on his behalf, he would benefit infinitely. Even if he could not say any good words on his behalf, as long as he could disclose to him what make the Emperor happy, what make him disgusted, what he was thinking of doing next, then he could plan accordingly with half the work, twice the effect, and win the Emperor's favor.

He grew up in a government officer's family, his father Sonin was the head of the Executive Ministers, he should know that 'to figure out the superior's intention' was the high-ranking official's sole secret, while it was also the most difficult thing to do. Before his very own eyes was one golden opportunity, so long as he could win this little eunuch over, someday the 'divine steed Huang will flash past' [figuratively means a meteoric rise in one's career]; appointment as the prime minister would not be a difficult matter. Therefore, he was hit by an inspiration and wanted to be sworn brothers with him.

Although Wei Xiaobao was clever, he did not, after all, have the slightest understanding of the government bureaucracy of the imperial court; he only knew that this high-ranking official was very fond of himself, so he could not help but feeling very proud. "This … this is really beyond my expectation," he said.

Songgotu pulled his hand. "Come, come, come!" he said, "Let us go to the worship hall."

Manchu people were devout Buddhists; in all civil and military officers' mansions there would be a Buddhist worship hall. The two of them entered the worship hall. Songgotu lighted incense and pulled Wei Xiaobao down to kneel together in front of the Buddhist image. He bowed and worshiped several times, and then said, "Today, disciple Songgotu and … and … and …" He turned his head and asked, "Gui *Xiongdi*, what is your great name? I haven't consulted you, it's truly preposterous."

"I am called Xiao Guizi," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Songgotu smiled and said, “Your honorable surname is Gui, isn’t it? But by what great name are you called?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “I … I … I am called Gui Xiaobao.”

Songgotu laughed, “Good name, good name,” he said, “You are indeed a jewel[61] among men!”

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, “In Yangzhou, people always call me ‘That little turtle Xiaobao’. What’s so special about this name ‘Xiaobao’ anyway?” He heard Songgotu said, “Today, disciple Songgotu with Gui Xiaobao, Gui *Xiongdi*, swear to be brothers[62]. Hereafter blessings will be enjoyed together, sorrows will be endured together. We cannot be born on the same year, same month and same day, but wish that we will die on the same year, same month, and same day. If disciple does not uphold *yi qi*, let me be punished by heaven and extinguished by the earth, forever will not raise my head to see the sun.” Finished speaking, he kowtowed and worship some more, then he said, “*Xiongdi*, you must also worship Buddha and make your vow!”

Wei Xiaobao thought, "You are a lot older than I am; if I really die on the same year, same month, and same day with you, my loss will be too great." But then he changed his mind, he had idea, "I am not Gui Xiaobao anyway, what is there to be feared to speak nonsense just for once?" Therefore, he also kowtowed before the image of Buddha and said in a loud and clear voice, "Disciple Gui Xiaobao came to the Emperor's Palace to be a little eunuch earlier, everybody calls me Xiao Guizi, with Songgotu, Suo *Daren*, Suo *Laoge* ['Lao' - old, 'ge' - older brother], swear to be brothers, blessings will be enjoyed together, sorrows will be endured together. We cannot be born on the same year, same month and same day, but wish that we will die on the same month, same month, and same day. If Xiao Guizi does not uphold *yi qi*, let Xiao Guizi be punished by heaven and

extinguished by the earth. When Xiao Guizi die, let Xiao Guizi be banished to the eighteenth level of the underworld and seized by the Ox-head and Horse-Face[63], and for a thousand years, for ten thousand years will not be reincarnated."

He shifted all disasters to Xiao Guizi; he also mentioned the words 'same month' twice, and thus changed the phrase 'die on the same year, same month, and same day' became 'die on the same month, same month, and same day', but he said it very quickly so that Songgotu did not catch it. Wei Xiaobao thought, "To die on the same month and same day with you is not a big deal; if you die on the third day of the third month, and I return to heaven a hundred years later on the third day of the third month, I won't suffer any loss." As for saying that after Xiao Guizi die, let Xiao Guizi be banished to the eighteenth level of the underworld and for ten thousand years will not be reincarnated, it was actually his real wish. Xiao Guizi had died under his hands, if his ghost returns for revenge, it would not be fun; but if in hell Xiao Guizi was detained securely by the Ox-head and Horse-face, in the world of the living Wei Xiaobao would enjoy peace and security very much.

When Songgotu heard Wei Xiaobao had finished speaking, the two of them bowed and kowtowed eight times before standing up together, and burst in loud laughter. Songgotu said with a laugh, "*Xiongdi*, now we are sworn brothers, we must be ten times closer to each other than blood-brothers. From now on, whatever you want your *Gege* to do for you, do not hesitate to open your mouth, no need to be polite."

"Do you need to say it?" Wei Xiaobao also laugh, "Ever since I came out of my mother's belly, I do not understand the meaning of the word 'polite'. *Dage*, what does 'polite' mean?" They looked at each other and roared in laughter.

"*Xiongdi*," Songgotu said, "The fact that we have sworn

brotherhood must not be told to others, to avoid other people use it against us. According to the imperial palace's regulations, we, external ministers, must not be too close to you, *Xiongdi*, internal officers. As long as we know it in our hearts, that should be enough."

"Right, right!" Wei Xiaobao said, "The mute eat the wonton, he counts it in his heart."

Seeing how smart and witty Wei Xiaobao was, how when ‘the head was pointed to him he immediately knew the tail’, Songgotu was even happier. "*Xiongdi*," he said, "In front of other people, I still call you Gui Gong-gong, and you call me Suo *Daren*. In a few days, come to my home, your *Gege* is going to accompany you drinking wine and watching the opera; we, two brothers, will have fun for a while."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he did not drink too much wine, but as soon as he heard the words 'watching the opera', his delight was incomparable. He clapped his hands and said with a laugh, "Wonderful, wonderful! I like watching the opera the most. When is it?"

Yangzhou's salt merchants lived extravagant lives, when they get married or given their daughters in marriage, or when a baby was born or they celebrated birthdays, oftentimes they would have the opera play for several consecutive days. Whenever Wei Xiaobao came across such occasion, naturally he would take advantage of the excitement and squeeze himself to the front of the stage to watch the opera. The host was celebrating an auspicious day, naturally they would not seriously deal with little rascal like him; oftentimes they would serve him a bowl of rice, with pieces of meat piled high on top of the rice. Whenever there was a folk festival, even more opera groups would perform around town. As soon as the words 'watching opera' was mentioned, his heart was in full bloom.

Songgotu said, "Since *Xiongdi* loves opera, I will invite you

often. Whenever *Xiongdi* has some free time, do not hesitate to let me know."

"How about tomorrow?" Wei Xiaobao said.

"That's great!" Songgotu said, "Tomorrow *youshi* hour [the tenth earthly branch, 5 - 7 pm] I will wait for you outside the Palace gate."

"Is it all right for me to leave the Palace?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Of course it is all right," Songgotu replied, "You serve the Emperor during the day; come evening, nobody has any right to interfere with your business. You have been promoted to be an Eunuch Leader, and you are very successful in the presence of His Majesty, who would dare to mess with you?"

Wei Xiaobao was beaming from ear to ear; originally he was thinking of slipping away from the imperial palace and would not come back, but listening to Songgotu, he realized his status was different now; he could come in and go out the imperial palace freely, he did not have to slip away hastily. "Alright," he said with a laugh, "It's a deal. We, two brothers, blessing we enjoy together, opera we watch together."

Songgotu pulled his hand and said, "Let's go back to Oboi's room and pick some treasures."

The two of them returned to Oboi's bedroom. Songgotu carefully look over various objects taken out of the hole on the ground. "*Xiongdi*," he asked, "Which one do you like?"

Wei Xiaobao said, “Which one is the most valuable? I don’t understand anything. Please pick one for me.”

“Alright!” Songgotu said. He picked a double-string of pearls and a jade horse and said, “These two items are very valuable. Will *Xiongdi* take it?”

“Very well!” Wei Xiaobao said; he put the pearls and jade horse into his pocket. Casually he picked a dagger, and felt it to

be unusually heavy. The dagger, including the hilt, was no more than a *chi* and two *cun*[64]; the sheathe was made of dried shark skin, at a glance it looked no different than an ordinary long knife or a sword. Wei Xiaobao grabbed the hilt with his left hand and pulled it out; he felt a burst of cold air hit his face, his nose itched and 'Ah-choo!' he sneezed. When he looked at the dagger again, he saw that the blade was as black as ink, without the least bit of glossiness. At first he thought that since Oboi hid this dagger in the secret treasure-trove, it must be a treasured dagger; who would have thought that the dagger looked this ugly? It looked like a wooden dagger. Slightly disappointed, he tossed it casually to the side. He heard a light 'swish' noise; the dagger penetrated the floor straight to its hilt.

"Ah!" Wei Xiaobao and Songgotu exclaimed; they were quite amazed. Wei Xiaobao tossed it casually, without exerting the least bit of strength, yet surprisingly the dagger could penetrate the floor by itself. The blade must be fantastically sharp that it was able to penetrate the floor like mud.

Wei Xiaobao stooped down to pick up the dagger and said, "This short sword looks rather strange."

Songgotu had vast experience and knowledge, he said, "Apparently this is a treasured sword, let us test it." From the wall he took a saber, unsheathed it, and held it horizontally across his chest; he said, "*Xiongdi*, use the dagger to chop on this saber."

Wei Xiaobao raised the dagger and chopped it down on the saber. 'Tchak!' the saber was smoothly cut into two. "Good!" both of them exclaimed as if by prior agreement. Without a doubt this dagger was indeed a treasured sword which was rarely seen in the world. What was amazing was that it cut the saber like a piece of wood, without producing any metallic clanking noise at all.

Songgotu laughed and said, “Congratulation, *Xiongdi*, for obtaining such a treasured sword. Among Oboi’s family’s treasure, this sword must be the chief.”

Wei Xiaobao was really happy, “*Dage*,” he said, “If you want it, I’ll give it to you.”

Songgotu shook his hand repeatedly, “Your *Gege* came from a military official family, afterwards, I became a civil officer, and left the military service behind. It would be better if *Xiongdi* take this treasured sword to play with.”

Wei Xiaobao put the dagger back into its sheathe and tied it on his belt. Songgotu laughed and said, “*Xiongdi*, this sword is so short, it’s better to keep it inside your boot, so when you enter the Palace, nobody would see it.” According to Qing Palace regulations, other than imperial bodyguards on duty, nobody else was allowed to enter the Palace carrying weapons.

“Yes!” Wei Xiaobao replied; he inserted the dagger into his boot. Based on his stellar reputation, as he enter and exit the Palace gate, it was unlikely that the imperial bodyguards would do a body search to see if he carried any prohibited materials.

After acquiring this dagger, Wei Xiaobao lost interest in any other treasures. A moment later, he was unable to bear it and pulled the dagger out again. He took down an iron spear from the wall, ‘Tchak!’ the iron spear was cut into two. He brandished the dagger and randomly cut and sliced around. Without exception all kinds of solid objects in the room were cut smoothly. Next he used the point of the dagger to draw a turtle on the sandalwood tabletop; he had just finished drawing when 'thud!' a sandalwood turtle fell down, while a hole in the shape of a turtle appeared on the tabletop.

"Old fellow Oboi!" Wei Xiaobao shouted, "You, Senior, are good! Ha ha!"

Songgotu meticulously inspected the other articles found in

the secret treasure-trove. He noticed among the pile there was a shiny black sleeveless garment. He picked it up and found it to be very light. The fabric was exceptionally soft, it was made of neither silk nor wool, in fact, he did not know any material that felt like it. His sole purpose right now was to curry favor with Wei Xiaobao, thereupon he called, "*Xiongdi*, this vest must be very warm. Take out your outer garment and put this on."

"What kind of treasure is this?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"I don't know either," Songgotu said, "Just put it on!"

"It's too big," Wei Xiaobao said.

"It's very soft," Songgotu replied, "It is a bit bigger, but by making a fold like this, it will fit."

Wei Xiaobao took it; it was indeed very light and soft. He remembered the previous year he asked his mother to make a silk cotton-padded jacket, his mother was busy for several days, but did not have enough money that in the end she could not make the jacket. This vest was obviously incomparable to the silk cotton-padded jacket; for one, the color was not too fresh and bright. He thought, "Fine, when I get back to Yangzhou later, I'll have mother look at it." Thereupon he took out his outer garment and put the vest on, before putting back the outer garment on top of it. The vest was rather big, fortunately it was very soft and thin, so it was not uncomfortable.

Finished inspecting Oboi's treasures, Songgotu called his subordinates to come in. Looking at the rough list of Oboi's valuables, he could not help but sticking out his tongue and said, "Oboi certainly know how to extort people; his wealth is many times greater than I anticipated." He waved his men out of the room again and then said to Wei Xiaobao, "*Xiongdi*, the Han people have a saying: 'A thousand *li* of officialdom is all wealth.' In his vast and mighty benevolence, His Majesty is

sending the two of us on this assignment, it is actually so that we may find an undeserved fortune. About this list, I can always alter it. We have more than two million *taels* of silver here, how much do you say we should announce it as?"

"I don't know anything about it," Wei Xiaobao said, "I'll leave it to *Dage* to decide."

Songgotu chuckled and said, "According to this list, altogether we have two million three hundred fifty three thousand four hundred and eighteen *taels*. The remaining digits can be kept as is, but we can erase one horizontal line and change the amount[65] to one million three hundred fifty three thousand four hundred and eighteen *taels*. That missing horizontal line can be split fifty-fifty [orig. 'one half equals zero point five'] between you and me. What do you think?"

Wei Xiaobao was shocked. "You ... you are saying ..." he stammered.

Songgotu laughed, "*Xiongdi* thinks it is not enough?" he said.

"No, no!" Wei Xiaobao said, "I ... I am just not too clear."

Songgotu said, "I said, about that one million *taels*, we split it equally between the two of us, brothers, each one get five-hundred thousand *taels*. If *Xiongdi* thinks it is too little, we can always recalculate it."

Wei Xiaobao's countenance changed. Growing up in a the brothel in Yangzhou, he had never had more than one or two *taels* in his hands. An undeserved fortune like this, gambling in the Palace, even when he won big, it was a matter of only several dozen *taels*, or perhaps one or two hundred *taels* of silver. Suddenly hearing that his share was five hundred thousand *taels*, he nearly did not believe his own ears.

The real reason Songgotu kept pushing this riches into his hands was actually to close his mouth, so that in front of the

Emperor he did not mention the truth about the real value of Oboi's wealth. Otherwise, if he ever revealed anything in the Emperor's presence, not only he would have to spit the ill-gotten wealth he had just swallowed, he would also ruin the future prospect of his career, plus inevitably he would also be charged with committing a major crime.

Seeing Wei Xiaobao countenance changed, Songgotu hastily said, "If *Xiongdi* has another thought, I will listen to your idea."

Wei Xiaobao let out a deep breath and said, "I have said that I'll leave it to *Dage* to decide. It's just that five hundred thousand ... five hundred thousand *taels* as my share it's a bit ... a bit ... too ... too much."

Songgotu felt a heavy burden was lifted up from his shoulder, he laughed aloud and said, "It's not too much, it's not too much, not too much at all. Let's do it this way then: we have people helping us managing this business, everybody must enjoy some profit. From your *Gege*'s five hundred thousand *taels* share, I will take fifty thousand *taels* to be distributed among my subordinates. *Xiongdi* should also take fifty thousand *taels* and presented the money to the imperial concubines and to the eunuch managers, so that everybody can have a little benefit. This way, nobody will have any loose tongue."

"It sounds good," Wei Xiaobao anxiously said, "But I don't know how to divide it."

"Just leave this matter to your *Gege*," Songgotu said, "I guarantee I will take care of everything, we won't offend anybody. They all will say that Gui Gong-gong is young, but he really know how to reach out to his friends. Money will open doors, from now on you and I will enjoy smooth sailing; we will have other people in all places helping us along the way."

"Yes, yes!" Wei Xiaobao said.

Songgotu added, "About this one million *taels*, there won't be

enough cash in Oboi's house, we must sell off his property as soon as possible, and everything must be with 'dry hand and clean foot', do not let other people have a handle on this. *Xiongdi*, in the Palace, you won't have any place to store all these gold *yuanbao*, silver *yuanbao*, am I correct?"

Suddenly obtaining a four hundred and fifty thousand *taels* of unexpected wealth, Wei Xiaobao was momentarily dizzy and light-headed, and was at a loss of what to do, whatever Songgotu said, he could only reply, "Yes, yes!"

Songgotu laughed and said, "In a few days, I am going to have several banks issue gold banknotes and silver banknotes, a hundred *taels* and fifty *taels* each, which *Xiongdi* can carry with you. Whenever you need it, you can go to the bank and exchange it to gold and silver, it's more convenient, and more reliable. Unless someone is groping your pocket, nobody knows that *Xiongdi* is this young, yet you are one of the rich men within our Beijing city wall. Ha ha, ha ha, ha ha!"

Wei Xiaobao followed by several 'Ha ha!', but his heart was filled with: "I really have four hundred and fifty thousand *taels*? Really four hundred and fifty thousand *taels*?" and "I have four hundred and fifty thousand *taels*, how am I going to spend it? Damn it, even if I eat pig's front legs and simmer-fried whole chicken every day for the rest of my life, I won't spend the entire four hundred and fifty thousand *taels*. Hot piece mama, *laozi* will open ten brothels in Yangzhou, each one is ten times more beautiful than the Lovely Spring Courtyard."

Ever since he was little, he had been cherishing the 'lofty aspiration' that when he grew up and flourished, he would open a brothel that was bigger and more luxurious than the Lovely Spring Courtyard, something that would raise others' eyebrows, something better than everybody else's. Whenever he had a quarrel with the proprietress of the Lovely Spring Courtyard, he would often say, "Hot piece mama, what's so great about your

Lovely Spring Courtyard? In a few years *laozi* will flourish and will open a Lovely Summer Courtyard across the street from you, a Lovely Autumn Courtyard on your left, and a Lovely Winter Courtyard on your right; I am going to snatch the light from your business. Brothel customers will visit my three courtyards, no one will visit yours, and you will drink the northwest wind." He wanted to open ten brothels at once, each one would be extravagant, so that nobody in Yangzhou would not see him in a new light; he could not help but was very elated.

Naturally Songgotu was not able to guess the major undertaking Wei Xiaobao was planning in his heart, he said, "*Xiongdi*, His Majesty instructed us to return Suksaha's property that was confiscated by Oboi to Suksaha's heir. We'd better take sixty or seventy thousand *taels* and give it to Suksaha's family. This is His Majesty's benevolence, the Suksaha family will be moved to tears, how can they dare to argue that it is too little? Moreover, if we give too much to Suksaha's family, it would appear that before his death Suksaha was a corrupt official, and then his descendants' face would not be honorable, would it?"

"Yes, yes!" Wei Xiaobao replied, while in his heart he mused, "Aren't we, the two brothers, dishonest officials? Our faces won't be necessarily disgraced, will it?"

Songgotu said, "The Empress Dowager and His Majesty clearly instructed us to get these two sutras, this is most important, we must deliver the books right away. It won't be too late if we slowly make inventory of Oboi's property later." Wei Xiaobao nodded his approval.

Immediately Songgotu fetched a couple of satin brocade to wrap the jade boxes. The two of them carried one box each as they returned to the Palace to see Kangxi. Seeing they managed to complete the assignment given by the Empress Dowager, Kangxi was very happy. He told Wei Xiaobao to follow

him with the sutras toward the Empress Dowager's Palace. Songgotu could not enter the Palace, he took his leave to return to put Oboi's family property in order.

Along the way Kangxi asked, "How much is Oboi's family property worth?"

Wei Xiaobao replied, "Suo *Daren*'s initial estimate is about one million three hundred fifty three thousand four hundred and eighteen *taels*." He made sure that the number came from Songgotu; in case the Emperor verify the actual facts in the future, he would have the leeway of denying and shifting the blame to others.

In this kind of shady business of committing fraud for personal gain, imitating the dog to steal the chicken, Wei Xiaobao could be considered a rare talent. When he was five, one of the prostitutes gave him five *wen* to buy some peaches on the street; he swindled one *wen* to buy candy and used the other four to buy peaches for the prostitute. Unexpectedly the prostitute did not suspect anything; she even gave him a peach. In Wei Xiaobao's mind, when some money passed through his hands and he gained some profit, it was heaven's law and earth's principle; it's just that in case somebody inquire, he must come up with some explanation. Because of this his head had been the recipient of several explosions of anger, and his butt suffered countless forceful kicks; therefore, he gained quite a few of valuable experience.

"Humph," Kangxi snorted, "B@stard!" he said, "He extorted that much fat and wealth of the people! More than a million three hundred thousand *taels.* Hey, hey, it's unbelievable."

Wei Xiaobao smirked inwardly, "And a million more, split in halves." Walking and chatting, they reached the Empress Dowager's Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful.

The Empress Dowager was very pleased to hear that two

sutras had been retrieved; she reached out to take the jade boxes from Kangxi's hands and unwrapped the satin brocade. Seeing the envelope, her smile was even wider. "Xiao Guizi," she said, "You handle this assignment very well!"

Wei Xiaobao knelt down to pay his respect; he said, "It's all thanks to the Empress Dowager and His Majesty's great fortune."

The Empress Dowager turned toward a little palace maid by her side and said, "Rui Chu, take Xiao Guizi to the back room, get some sweet preserved fruits and gave it to him."

Rui Chu was a little palace maid around twelve, thirteen years of age with pretty facial features; she smiled and complied, "Yes!"

Wei Xiaobao paid his respect again and said, "Thank you for the Empress Dowager's reward, thank you for Your Majesty's reward."

"Xiao Guizi," Kangxi said, "Finish eating, you may return alone, I am staying here to accompany Empress Dowager to dine, you don't need to wait on me."

Wei Xiaobao acknowledged and followed Rui Chu to the inner all, where they entered a very small side room. Rui Chu opened a screened cabinet, inside the cabinet were more than a dozen types of cakes, pastries and candies. She laughed and said, "You are called Xiao Guizi, so you'll have to eat osmanthus[66] flavored pine-nut candy first." As she said that, she picked small box of pine-nut candy. The aroma of pine-nut mixed with the aroma of osmanthus flower, the smell was very good.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "*Jiejie* [older sister] should also eat some."

Rui Chu said, "The Empress Dowager is rewarding you with something to eat, she is not rewarding me. As slaves, how can

we steal food?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “You can eat quietly, nobody will see it, why so tight?”

Rui Chu blushed and shook her head repeatedly, she smiled and said, “I am not eating.”

“I am eating alone, you are watching from the side, it’s just improper,” Wei Xiaobao said.

Rui Chu smiled. “This is your good fortune,” she said, “I only serve the Empress Dowager, I don’t serve even His Majesty, but today I am serving you some delicacy.”

Seeing her sweet and captivating smile, Wei Xiaobao also laughed and said, “I am serving His Majesty, but I also serve you delicacies, so we are even.”

“Pfft,” Rui Chu stifled a laugh, she brought her hand up to cover her mouth, and said with a smile, “Hurry up, eat something. If Empress Dowager knew we are chatting and joking in here, she might be angry.”

When he was still in Yangzhou, he saw beautiful women coming and going the Lovely Spring Courtyard all the time; upon entering the Palace, however, this was the first time he had ever seen a young woman about his age who was keeping him company. He was very pleased, and suddenly had a bright idea. “How about this,” he said, “I will take some delicacies back with me, when you are done serving the Empress Dowager, you can come out and we can eat together.”

Rui Chu showed a slight blush, “That won’t work,” she said, “By the time I am done serving the Empress Dowager, it will be very late at night.”

“So what if it is very late at night?” Wei Xiaobao said, “Will you wait for me here?”

Serving the Empress Dowager as a palace maid, Rui Chu’s

colleagues were mostly women who were considerably older than she was; ordinarily, they could not talk congenially with each other. Now that Wei Xiaobao was determined to eat candy with her, she could hear the sincerity in his voice and was quite moved.

"How about outside the flower garden?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "Midnight, third watch of the night [between 11pm – 1 am], nobody will know." Hesitantly Rui Chu nodded her head.

Wei Xiaobao was delighted, "Good, that's settled then," he said, "Quickly give me some preserved fruits, a bit more of the ones you love to eat."

Rui Chu smiled, "I won't eat it all by myself," she said, "Which ones would you like?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed, "Whatever *Jiejie* loves to eat, I'll eat the same," he replied.

Hearing his sweet-talking, Rui Chu was very happy, immediately she chose about a dozen kinds of dried fruits, candy, cakes and pastries, and put it all in a small paper carton.

In a low voice Wei Xiaobao said, "Tonight, third watch of the night, I will wait for you in the flower garden pavilion."

Rui Chu nodded, in a low voice she said, "You must be careful."

"And so must you," Wei Xiaobao replied. He took the paper carton and returned to his residence, full of joy and expectations.

When he first jostled with the Emperor, who feigned to be Xiao Xuanzi, he was very excited, but when the secret was exposed, he could not play with him anymore. These past few days in the Palace, everybody seemed to fawn on him. Although he was pleased, he did not have the excitement of enjoying himself. This time he was having a rendezvous with a little palace maid

in the middle of the night, there was three-part danger in the fun; he thought it was most exciting. After all, he was still very young; although as a child he grew up in a brothel, on the matter between men and women, he only saw a lot, but did not have any personal understanding.

Chapter 6

Understanding the idea of compassion and talent today, one will know when to plant the trees.

(Translated by Foxs)

The three palms of the two people were locked to each other in internal energy combat. A short blade appeared in the Empress Dowager's left hand, the spike's point moved toward Hai Laogong's lower abdomen. However, when the spike was about a chi away from the opponent's lower abdomen, she was unable to push it even for half a cun farther.

Hai Laogong asked what had happened that day, Wei Xiaobao told him how he went to Oboi's home to search the house and confiscate his possessions. However, he did not mention anything about how he embezzled some treasure, gold and silver, dagger, et cetera. He concluded his narrative by saying, "The Empress Dowager sent me to Oboi's home to get hold of two copies of the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra' ..."

Hai Laogong suddenly sprang up and asked, "Oboi has two copies of `Forty-two-chapter Sutra'?"

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao replied, "It was the Empress Dowager and His Majesty who sent me to fetch the books; otherwise I would have fetched it for you, other people do not need to know."

Hai Laogong's countenance darkened. "Humph," he grunted, and then coldly said, "So it fell into the Empress Dowager's hands. Very good, very good!"

A moment later the kitchen delivered their dinner. Hai Laogong only ate half of a small bowl and then he stopped eating altogether, he rolled his eyes until only the white part was visible, looked up to the ceiling and was lost in thought.

After dinner, Wei Xiaobao was thinking of a short nap before leaving on the third watch to see that little palace maid to chat and have fun. Seeing Hai Laogong was sitting unmoving while staring blankly into the space, he went to bed, fully clothed, and fell asleep.

After sleeping fitfully for a while, he quietly got up and tucked the small box containing the cake and pastry into his pocket. Afraid to wake Hai Laogong up, step by step he quietly tiptoed out. He reached the door, quietly opened the latch, and quietly pushed one door leaf; suddenly he heard Hai Laogong ask, "Xiao Guizi, where are you going?"

Wei Xiaobao was startled. "I ... I want to pee," he said.

"Why don't you pee in your room?" Hai Laogong asked.

"I couldn't sleep," Wei Xiaobao replied, "I want to take a walk in the garden." Afraid Hai Laogong might stop him, without saying anything he stepped out. But his left foot had just moved one step when he felt the collar behind his neck tightened as he was grabbed by Hai Laogong and lifted up.

"Ah!" Wei Xiaobao screamed, then he had a thought, "Bad, bad, the old turtle knew I was going to see that little palace maid and stop me from going." Before he finished his thought, Hai Laogong had already thrown him onto the bed.

"Gong-gong," Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "Are you testing my martial art? You haven't taught me anything these past several days. What do you call that grab?"

"Humph," Hai Laogong said, "It is called 'Catching a *Bie* [freshwater soft-shelled turtle] in the Jar', it's very easy. A *bie* is an armored fish, so I can catch you, a little armored fish."

"Old armored fish caught little armored fish!" Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, but of course he did not dare to say it out loud. He rolled his eyes, trying to find a way to escape.

Hai Laogong sat on the side of the bed and gently said, "You are bold yet cautious, smart and witty; although you are unwilling to steadfastly train martial art, yet if I polish and refine you well, you may be considered as a good material. It's too bad, really too bad."

"Gong-gong, why is it too bad?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Hai Laogong did not answer, he only heaved a sigh. After half a day, he said, "Your Beijing accent is not bad, you learned well. If several months ago you were able to speak like this, without any Yangzhou accent at all, it would not be easy to detect."

Wei Xiaobao was really shocked. In a split second all the hair in his body stood up; he was unable to stop his body from

trembling, and his teeth from chattering lightly. With a forced laugh he said, "Gong-gong, tonight you ... you speak really ... hee hee ... really strange."

Hai Laogong heaved a sigh again and asked, "Child, how old are you this year?"

Hearing his gentle tone, Wei Xiaobao's fright and panic somewhat diminished; he said, "I ... I am thirteen, I think."

"Thirteen is thirteen, fourteen is fourteen," Hai Laogong said, "Why is it 'thirteen, I think'?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "My mother did not remember it too clearly, of course I won't have any way of knowing." It was a true statement, his mother was actually muddle-headed, she could not ascertain Wei Xiaobao's real age.

Hai Laogong nodded and coughed several times before saying, "During martial art training several years ago, I accidentally suffer a fire deviation, and thus triggered up this coughing illness. The longer I cough, the worse it is, so for the last few years I know I won't get better."

Wei Xiaobao said, "I ... think recently ... recently your cough is getting better."

Hai Laogong shook his head, "What do you mean better?" he said, "Not better at all. My chest hurts very bad, how would you know that?"

"How do you feel now?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "Do you want me to get the medicine for you to take?"

Hai Laogong sighed, "My eyes can no longer see," he said, "Medicine cannot be taken randomly."

Wei Xiaobao did not dare to breathe loudly; he was wondering the real reason behind those words.

Hai Laogong continued, "Your luck is very good, you managed

to curry the Emperor's favor, actually, you might achieve great things. Your body has not been cleansed, but it's not a big deal, I can purify you myself. It's just that, ay ..., it's too late, too late."

Wei Xiaobao did not understand the meaning of 'purification', he only felt that somehow the way Hai Laogong speaking tonight was very strange. He said in a gentle voice, "Gong-gong, it's late, you should sleep."

"Sleep? Sleep!" Hai Laogong said, "Ay, after I wake up from sleep, then what? Sleep in the morning, sleep at night, I want to sleep without waking forever. Child, an eternal sleep, no need to wake up, no pain in the pit of your stomach, no bad cough, won't that be extraordinarily beautiful?" Wei Xiaobao was so frightened that he did not dare to make any noise.

"Child," Hai Laogong continued, "Who else is there in your home?"

It was such a boring, ordinary question, but Wei Xiaobao had such a hard time to answer it. He did not know who else were in the dead Xiao Guizi's home; if he gave a random answer, he would most likely give himself away, but he could not not answering it. He was hoping that Hai Laogong did not know the situation in Xiao Guizi's home, and thus the reason he asked. Thereupon he said, "There is only my *Laoniang*[67] at home; as for the rest of my family, over these last few years, ay, I don't want to talk about it." He spoke in such a way that he mentioned the top part, but did not continue to the bottom. Supposing Xiao Guizi still had a father, older brother, older sister or younger brother, there was no harm in him using 'I don't want to talk about it' as an excuse.

Hai Laogong said, "Only your *Laoniang*. In your Fujian dialect, is that how you call your mother?"

Wei Xiaobao was again very shocked. "What Fujian dialect?"

he mused, “Could it be that Xiao Guizi is from Fujian? He said earlier that I have Yangzhou accent, perhaps … perhaps … the fact that his eyes were blinded by me, he still does not know?” In a flash, innumerable thoughts flitted through his mind; he said vaguely, “This … this … why did you ask?”

Hai Laogong sighed and said, “You are still young, yet so bad. Hey, in the end, do you look like your father, or like your mother?”

Wei Xiaobao giggled and said, “I don’t look like anybody. Good, I am not very good, bad, I can’t be considered outstandingly bad.”

Hai Laogong coughed several times before saying, “I was already a grown-up when I was purified and became a eunuch …”

Wei Xiaobao groaned inwardly, “Turns out to become a eunuch one must be purified; that is cutting off your peeing thing. He knew I haven’t been purified, if he purifies me, that will be sending the dragon nicely to the east …”

He heard Hai Laogong continued, “Actually, I had a son, what a pity he died when he was eight. If he were alive today, my grandson would be about your age. That man surnamed Mao, Mao Shiba, is not your father, is he?”

With a trembling voice Wei Xiaobao said, “No … he is not! Hot piece mama, of … of course he is not.” In his fright, he blurted out Yangzhou slang.

Hai Laogong said, “I don’t think he is. If you were my son, and I lost you trapped in the imperial palace, even if there were great dangers, I would still try to help you out.”

Wei Xiaobao forced a laugh and said, “Too bad I don’t have a father as good as you.”

Hai Laogong said, “I taught you two sets of martial art, the

first one was the 'big grappling technique', the second one was the 'Great Compassion Great Sorrow Thousand-Leaf Hand'. I have not learned both sets of technique entirely, naturally you haven’t mastered the sets, perhaps you only learned a tenth, half a tenth. Hey hey, hey hey.”

“That’s right,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You, Senior, better teach me so that I may master these two sets or technique entirely. You have this kind of number-one-under-the-heavens martial art skill, if you have someone to pass your skill on, he may make you famous, it’s the sensible thing to do.”

Hai Laogong shook his head. “These words ‘number one under the heavens’, how do I dare to accept? I don’t know how many people have superior martial art skill in the world. These two sets of martial art skill, even in all my life I won’t have enough time to learn it entirely.” He paused for a moment, then said, “Take a breath, put your hand on the left side of your lower abdomen, about three *cun* away from your belly button, and press hard, how do you feel?”

Wei Xiaobao put his hand according to his instruction and pressed hard. Instantly a pain penetrated his heart and liver; “Ah!” he could not help but scream. In a flash his brow was beaded with sweat and he could not stop panting. For nearly more than half a month he had occasionally felt a dull ache on the left side of his lower abdomen, but he always thought it was because he ate something bad, moreover, the pain only appeared momentarily and immediately subsided, thus he had never given it any further thought. Who could have imagined that with a hard press like that the pain could be this severe?

With a gloomy voice Hai Laogong said, “Isn’t it amusing?”

Wei Xiaobao cursed fiercely in his belly, “Dead old turtle, stinky old turtle!” But what he said was, “Just a little pain, what’s so amusing about it?”

Hai Laogong said, “Every morning when you go gambling and training martial art with His Majesty, the food is always delivered before you come back. I thought that the soup is not tasty enough, so every day I took a bottle of medicine from the medicine chest and added a little bit of stuff into your soup. Only a little tiny bit; if I added too much, the toxicity would be too heavy, it would not be appropriate for your body. You are a very careful person, but I have never taken the soup, don’t you have the least bit of suspicion?”

Wei Xiaobao was absolutely terrified, he said, “I … I thought you didn’t like the soup. You … you said that when you drink the soup, you … you … will cou … cough …”

“Actually, I really like to drink soup,” Hai Laogong said, “But if the soup is poisoned, although the dose is very light, and you take it daily, over a long period of time, it will be a little bit dangerous, won’t it?”

Wei Xiaobao angrily said, “Absolutely, absolutely! Gong-gong, you are really formidable.”

Hai Laogong sighed. “That’s not necessarily true,” he said, “Actually, I wanted you to take the poison for three more months before I’d let you out of the Palace, so that you will feel the stomach pain gradually worsen. At first you will feel about an hour of pain every day, and the pain won’t be so severe. Later, the pain will be more and more severe, the duration will also be longer and longer. Roughly in about a year, you will feel great pain all day long; a pain so terrible that you will want to dash your own head against the wall, a pain so severe that you will want to bite your own hands, your own legs, piece by piece.” Speaking to this point, he sighed before continuing, “It’s a pity than my body is deteriorating fast, I am afraid I cannot wait much longer. The poison in your body, nobody else has the antidote, I am the only one who has it. Little baby, who sent you? Who has thought about this plan to blind me? If you

answer me truthfully, I'll give you the antidote right away."

Wei Xiaobao might be young, but he knew that even if he mentioned the name of the person who sent him, in no way Hai Laogong would spare his life; much less there was indeed nobody sending him; thereupon he said, "Of course somebody has sent me, but I am afraid as soon as I say it, you would jump in fright. Turns out you knew it early on that I am not Xiao Guizi, and have thought this method to torture me. Ha ha, ha ha! You are the one who has fallen into my trick! Ha ha, ha ha!" While laughing heartily, his body made a random movement; bending his right leg, his right hand grabbed the hilt of the dagger. Very slowly he pulled the dagger from its scabbard, without making any noise at all. Even if there were some noise, he was confident his laughter would cover it.

"What trick of yours did I fall into?" Hai Laogong asked.

Wei Xiaobao was talking nonsense; he only wanted to distract him. So he simply continued talking nonsense, "From the first day I have already tasted the poison in the soup. I discussed it over with Xiao Xuanzi, and he said that you are poisoning me …"

Hai Laogong was startled, "His Majesty knew about it?" he asked.

"How could he not know?" Wei Xiaobao replied, "It's just that at the time I did not know he was the Emperor. Xiao Xuanzi told me not to make a word or movement, just to be careful, so when I took the soup, I only put it in my mouth and spit it out again to the bowl; you could not see anyway." While speaking, he raised the dagger half a *cun* by half a *cun* up, with the tip of the dagger aimed at the pit of Hai Laogong's stomach. He thought that if he failed to kill him in one stab, even if the dagger stabbed Hai Laogong, with just a palm strike Wei Xiaobao's own life would be gone.

Hai Laogong was half believing half doubting; with a cold laugh he said, “If you did not drink the soup, how come with one press on your left abdomen, the pain was unbearable?”

Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, “I supposed even though I spat the soup out, I did not rinse my mouth afterwards, the poison is still going down my stomach.” While saying that, the dagger was moved several *cun* closer.

“That’s very good, then,” he heard Hai Laogong said, “In any case, the poison cannot be neutralized. Your poisoning is somewhat lighter, it will flare-up somewhat slower, your suffering can only be worse.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud; in the midst of the long laughter, he brought his entire strength into his right arm as he lunge the dagger violently toward the pit of Hai Laogong’s stomach. He had already planned that as soon as the dagger hit, he would promptly roll toward the corner of the bed, and then from the corner of the bed he would scuttle out.

Hai Laogong felt a burst of cold air hitting his face; he was slightly surprised, but knew that the opponent had already made a move. He did not have time to think about the nature of the attack; his left hand swept forward to block the incoming blade, his right palm struck out, ‘Bang!’ it hit Wei Xiaobao, sending him flying out, crashing through the window frame, and falling straight onto the flower garden outside the window. Right away he felt severe pain on his left hand; four of his fingers were severed by the dagger.

If not for Wei Xiaobao’s dagger emitted a strong cold air, while he did not have the slightest sign of the incoming attack beforehand, by this time the pit of his stomach would have been stabbed. However, if the dagger was an ordinary one, with the discrepancy between the two persons’ strength being too far, even if the dagger stabbed his chest, it would only be a superficial injury. His internal strength was everywhere; his

palm was like iron, as it struck a saber or sword, or shook a flying dagger, he could not possibly injure his own palm. But in all honesty this dagger was simply too sharp. Hai Laogong's painstaking dozen of year's cultivation of internal strength unexpectedly could not shake this incoming dagger away, instead, it cut off his four fingers noiselessly. However, his right palm hit Wei Xiaobao squarely on the pit of his stomach; this palm strike was able to break an upright stone tablet and could split a rock, it was not a small matter at all. He guessed that Wei Xiaobao's internal organs were completely smashed and that he had already died before even flying outside the window.

Hai Laogong laughed coldly and muttered to himself, "He died too easily, this little demon had it too lightly." After calming himself down, he took out some metal cut medicine from his medicine chest and applied it to his wound. Tearing off the bed sheet, he wrapped his left palm, while muttering, "What kind of weapon did that little demon use? How come it's this fierce?" Suppressing the severe pain in his hand, he leaped out the window and groped the place where Wei Xiaobao was supposed to fall; he wanted to find the blade that he had never even heard about, the sharp blade that he had never seen before. To his surprise, however, after groping about for a long time, he did not find anything.

Before he was blinded, he was very familiar with the garden outside his window; where the flowers were, where the rocks were, everything was etched in his heart. Obviously he heard Wei Xiaobao had fallen next to the cluster of Chinese peony; there was the possibility that the treasured blade was shaken out of his hand and flew far away, but his body could not possibly disappear, could it?

When Wei Xiaobao was hit by the palm, his breathing was blocked instantly, there was an acute pain in the pit of his stomach, and he felt as if the hundreds of bones on his four

limbs were disintegrated to a *cun*-size pieces. He was thrown onto the ground and nearly passed out. He knew he was at the verge of death; since he was unable to kill Hai Laogong with a single stab, the old turtle would definitely come out to pursue and attack; therefore, with the remaining strength in his body he crawled up. But after taking only two steps, his feet gave up; he slipped and fell again, and rolled down from a sloped ground all the way to the bottom.

If Hai Laogong did not have his fingers cut, the noise of Wei Xiaobao rolling down the slope would naturally not escape his ears; however, he was severely wounded, he was distraught with anxiety, in addition, even in his dream he would not think that after being hit by his palm, this little demon did not die. Although he did hear some noise, he did not give it further thought as the cause of the noise.

The sloping ground was quite long, Wei Xiaobao rolled for more than ten *zhang* before stopping. He struggled hard to stand up and slowly walked away; the muscle and bones in his entire body were unbearably painful, luckily the dagger was still tightly grasped in his hand. He rejoiced inwardly, “The old turtle hit me and sent me out the window just now, unexpectedly I did not stab myself with the dagger, I was extremely lucky.” Inserting the dagger into his boot, he thought, “My masquerade has been unmasked, the old turtle already know I am a fake goods, I cannot live in the Palace anymore. Too bad the four hundred fifty thousand *tael* of money has turned into an empty joy. His granny, where has there ever been one man who has this kind of stroke of luck? An ill-gotten gain worth four hundred fifty thousand *taels*. In other word, *laozi* has gained a four hundred fifty thousand *tael* wealth, but *laozi* is too extravagant, in just one night I spent it all until nothing’s left. Don’t you think it’s so awesome?” Bragging in his heart, he could not help but feeling very proud of himself.

He also thought, “That little palace maid is still waiting for me; in any event, I cannot leave the Palace on the third watch in the middle of the night, I might as well go and see her. Aiyo …” He put his hand into his pocket to feel the small carton box, and found that the box had been squeezed flat; he thought, “I’ll still show it to her, so she won’t be too anxious waiting for me. I’ll tell her I fell down and squeeze the preserved fruits and candy mushy, turning it into a pile of cow dung. But this pile of cow dung is sweet and fragrant, and taste outstandingly good. Ha ha, hot piece mama, have you even eaten cow dung so sweet and fragrant? *Laozi* has.”

The more he thought, the more he felt amused; he picked up his speed toward the Empress Dowager’s Palace of Compassion and Peace. But as he walked faster for only several steps, there was an acute pain on the pit of his stomach, forcing him to slow down. Arriving at the Palace of Compassion and Peace, he saw the palace gate was closed. “It’s bad,” he thought, “I did not think this gate would be closed; how am I going to get in?”

While he was wondering what to do, suddenly the palace gate was pushed open noiselessly, followed by a little palace maid’s head appeared. Under the moonlight he was able to see clearly that it was indeed Rui Chu. He saw her smiling and beckoning to him. Wei Xiaobao was delighted; he slipped in quietly.

Rui Chu closed the gate and then in a low voice whispered in his ear, “I was afraid you are not coming; I have been waiting here for a long time.”

“I am late,” Wei Xiaobao said in a low voice, “On my way here I stumbled upon a stinky and hard-to-deal-with old turtle; I tripped and fell down.”

“Is there any sea turtle in the garden?” Rui Chu said, “I have never seen one. You … are your hurt from the fall?”

In his determination to come here, Wei Xiaobao was able to

endure the pain, but as soon as Rui Chu asked, he felt in his entire body there was not a place where it did not hurt; he could not help but groaning. Rui Chu pulled his hand and asked in low voice, "Which part hurts?"

Wei Xiaobao was just about to reply when suddenly he saw a shadow flitted across on the ground; when he raised his head, he saw an enormous eagle flying over the wall and gently landed on the ground. He was really shocked and nearly let out a shout. Under the moonlight he saw the giant eagle stood up like a human. Turned out it was not a giant eagle at all, but a human. This person had a slim built with a hunched back; who else but Hai Laogong himself?

Originally, Rui Chu was facing Wei Xiaobao, so she did not see Hai Laogong had come, but seeing Wei Xiaobao turn his head and stare with terror-stricken expression on his face, she also turned her head around. Wei Xiaobao reached out with his left hand to cover her mouth and pressed rather hard to prevent her from making the least bit of noise. His right hand shook anxiously, signaling her not to make any noise. Rui Chu nodded. Wei Xiaobao slowly took his hand off her mouth while his gaze was fixed on Hai Laogong.

He saw Hai Laogong was standing perfectly still, as if he was listening attentively to the sound of movement around him. It was a moment later that he finally walked forward slowly. Seeing Hai Laogong did not walk toward them, Wei Xiaobao let out a breath quietly. "The old turtle is really formidable," he said in his heart, "Although he is blind, unexpectedly he is able to pursue me to this place." He also thought, "As long as this little palace maid and I do not make any sound, the old turtle cannot possibly find me."

Hai Laogong had walked several steps forward, but suddenly he jumped up and landed in front of Wei Xiaobao. Reaching out with his left hand, he grabbed Rui Chu's neck. "Ah!" Rui Chu

cried, but her throat was quickly pinched that the cry was muffled.

Something flashed in Wei Xiaobao's mind, "The old turtle is looking for me, he is not looking for this little palace maid, he could not possibly kill her." This moment he was only two *chi* away from Hai Laogong; he was so scared that he almost pee in his pants, but he did not move at all, because he knew that as soon as he move just one finger, Hai Laogong would hear him.

In a low voice Hai Laogong said, "Don't make noise! You don't obey, I'll kill you. Answer my question softly. Who are you?"

"I ... I ..." Rui Chu said in low voice.

Hai Laogong stretched out his right hand and ran it over the top of her head, and ran it across her face. "You are a little palace maid, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes, yes!" Rui Chu replied.

"It's the third watch in the middle of the night," Hai Laogong said, "What are you doing here?"

Rui Chu said, "I ... I am here to have fun."

Hai Laogong's face revealed a faint smile; under the dim moonlight, he looked even more gloomy and grim. "Who else is here with you?" he asked, while leaning his head slightly to listen attentively.

Just now Rui Chu did not hold her breath nor did she know how to concentrate her breathing; in panic, she breathed loudly and thus Hai Laogong knew where she was standing. Although Wei Xiaobao was also standing close-by, he was breathing very lightly, so that for now his presence was not detected.

Wei Xiaobao wanted to signal her not to say anything, but he did not dare to move his arm. Luckily Rui Chu was perceptive, realizing he was blind, she said, "No ... nobody."

"Where does the Empress Dowager live?" Hai Laogong said, "Take me to see her."

Rui Chu was frightened. "Gong-gong, please ... please don't tell Empress Dowager," she pleaded, "Next time ... next time I will not dare anymore." She only knew that this eunuch was arresting her to be reported to the Empress Dowager.

"It's useless for you to plead with me," Hai Laogong said, "If you don't take me, I'll crush your neck immediately." His hand squeezed lightly, Rui Chu's breathing was immediately stopped, her small face bulged very red.

Wei Xiaobao was so frightened that finally he peed in his pants, the urine was dripping from his crotch. Luckily Hai Laogong did not pay any attention; even if he heard it, he would think that it was Rui Chu who peed from the fright.

Hai Laogong loosened his left hand slowly and said in a low voice, "Quickly take me there."

Rui Chu did not have any choice but to say, "Alright!" She cast a glance toward Wei Xiaobao, signaling him with her eyes to quickly run away, telling him that she would not give him away. "The Empress Dowager's personal palace is on that side!" she said in a low voice, while slowly moving forward. With his hand still holding her throat, Hai Laogong walked beside her.

Wei Xiaobao thought it over, "The old turtle must be going to the Empress Dowager to tell her that I am a fake little eunuch, that Xiao Guizi was murdered by me, that his eyes were blinded by me; he wants the Empress Dowager to issue an order to have me arrested immediately. Why didn't he report me to His Majesty? Ah right, he knew His majesty is good to me, most likely his complain will not be considered. Then ... then what should I do? I must escape from the Palace immediately. Aiyo, not good! By this time the Palace gate has been shut for a long time, how can I get out? Very soon the Empress Dowager will

give her order, and then I won't be able to escape even if I grew wings."

While he was still at a loss, he heard a woman's voice coming from the room ahead suddenly asked, "Who's that outside?" This gloomy and eerie voice, Wei Xiaobao recognized as the Empress Dowager's voice. He was frightened and wanted to lift his heels and run away, but he heard Hai Laogong say, "Your servant Hai Tianfu is paying his respect to you, Senior." This voice was also gloomy and eerie, without any sign of respect at all.

Wei Xiaobao felt very strange, "Who does the old turtle think he is? He has the audacity to be this rude to the Empress Dowager." He had another thought, "The way the old turtle speak is so unpleasant, most likely the Empress Dowager has always loathed him, why don't I seize this opportunity to argue with him? I am not able to escape anyway." He knew it was risky, but he recalled that he had recently rendered a great merit, the Emperor and Empress Dowager were very happy, killing one or two Xiao Guizi and blinding the eyes of old turtle Hai certainly could not be considered a great crime. If he was in a serious trouble, he could still ask his sworn brother Songgotu to intercede for him. If he lifted his feet and left, the old turtle could say anything he liked, since Wei Xiaobao had already escaped, naturally he was having a guilty conscience; and thus from being innocent Wei Xiaobao had turned into the guilty party.

He thought further, "If the Empress Dowager ask why did I kill Xiao Guizi? I'll say ... I'll say, um, I'll say I heard Xiao Guizi and the old turtle Hai saying malicious remarks against the Emperor and Empress Dowager, I'll say that they have many, many opinions, which are very unpleasant to hear; I was really angry and was at the end of my patience, hence I picked up a knife and killed Xiao Guizi. I also seized the chance to blind the old

turtle's eyes. As for the malicious words, I can always make it up later. Competing with hands and feet, I cannot prevail against the old turtle. Competing in telling lies and bragging, how can the old turtle be *laozi*'s match?" Thinking about it, he was very proud of himself, immediately his courage grew and he did not wish to escape anymore. What he was most afraid of was that if Hai Laogong could not win the argument, he would leap and strike him dead with a palm, and then Wei Xiaobao would die an unjust death. Consequently, when he plead innocence in front of the Empress Dowager, he must stand on a safe place, somewhere the old turtle was not able to reach, someplace he could not strike.

He heard the Empress Dowager said, "If you want to pay your respect, why didn't you do it during day time? You came here in the middle of the night, what kind of propriety is that?"

"Your servant has a secret important matter to report to the Empress Dowager," Hai Laogong said, "During the day time, there will be too many ears. If someone hears about it, it will be greatly inconvenient."

"Hear, hear! The old turtle is about to lodge a complaint," Wei Xiaobao mused, "I'll listen to what he has to say first. When he has said most of it, it won't be too late for me to butt in. But where should I hide?" Looking at the surrounding terrain, he chose a good spot. Step by step he crept to the back of rock garden by the goldfish pond. He thought, "If the old turtle pounce on me, 'Splash!' he would've fallen into the goldfish pond first, then I would dash into the Empress Dowager's room. Even if the old turtle has an enormous guts, he wouldn't dare to barge into the Empress Dowager's room to beat people."

He heard the Empress Dowager snorted and said, "What kind of secret important matter? You may say it right away."

"Does the Empress Dowager have anybody else by her side?" Hai Laogong asked, "What the old servant is about to say is a

top secret."

"How about you come in here and do the search?" the Empress Dowager said, "Your martial art skill is superb; don't tell me that you cannot hear whether I have someone else by my side."

"Your servant does not dare to enter the Empress Dowager's room," Hai Laogong said, "May I inconvenience the Empress Dowager's holy self to step out of the room? Your servant has something to report."

"Humph," the Empress Dowager said, "You are getting more and more audacious. Whose authority do you rely on that you dare to be this unbridled?"

Listening to this, Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, he cursed silently, "Old turtle, you are more and more brazen, now whose authority will you rely on? You really dare to be this unbridled!"

"Your servant does not dare!" Hai Laogong said.

The Empress Dowager snorted again and said, "You ... you already do not have any regards of me, tonight you suddenly appear here, what kind of trick are you playing?"

Wei Xiaobao was even happier, he struggled hard to keep himself from shouting several curses to help the Empress Dowager scolding Hai Laogong. He said in his heart, "Old turtle, oh old turtle, you have not lodged any complaint, you have already bumped into a big nail, you are attracting trouble for yourself. Apparently *laozi* does not need to personally go into action, just the Empress Dowager alone is enough to lash her tongue on you and drive you away."

He heard Hai Laogong said, "It's all right if the Empress Dowager does not wish to know any news about that person, your servant is leaving!"

Wei Xiaobao was delighted, he said in his heart, "Go well, go

delightfully, go with the blowing wind[68]. Quickly roll away, you, mother of a b@stard! Why would the Empress Dowager wants to know any news about me?"

But he heard the Empress Dowager said, "What news do you have for me?"

"The news from Mount Wutai[69]!" Hai Laogong said.

"Mount Wutai? You ... what are you talking about?" the Empress Dowager said. Her voice trembled slightly.

Under the moonlight Wei Xiaobao saw Hai Laogong stretch out a hand and poked, Rui Chu collapsed immediately. He was startled and was grieved in his heart; he thought, "The old turtle has killed this little miss. When I tell her later, the Empress Dowager will be angrier. It will be extremely difficult for the old turtle to bring up a charge against me."

He heard the Empress Dowager asked, "You ... whom did you harm?"

"It's a little palace maid serving the Empress Dowager," Hai Laogong replied, "Your servant does not dare to harm her, I only sealed her acupoint so that she won't hear our conversation."

Wei Xiaobao was relieved, "Turns out the old turtle did not kill her!" Yet in the deepest part of his heart there was a faint feeling of disappointment; Hai Laogong did not kill the little palace maid, his own plight could not be considered favorable.

"Mount Wutai?" the Empress Dowager asked again, "Why did you mention Mount Wutai?"

Hai Laogong said, "If Empress Dowager wants to know the details, I will have no choice but to ask your holy self to come out. It's the middle of the night, your servant cannot enter the Empress Dowager room; if I speak loudly here, this secret

matter will be heard by the palace maids and the court eunuchs, then it won't be fun." The Empress Dowager hesitated for a moment and then said, "Fine!" The sound of door opening was heard, with a graceful steps she walked out of the room.

Wei Xiaobao pulled back behind the rockery, he mused, "Old turtle Hai cannot see me, but the Empress Dowager is not blind." He did not dare to stick out his neck and look around. When the Empress Dowager came out, he caught of a glimpse of her and noticed that she was not tall and somewhat short and stout. He had seen the Empress Dowager twice, but both times she was sitting down.

He heard the Empress Dowager said, "You said a moment ago that he went to Mount Wutai, is that ... is that true?"

Hai Laogong said, "Your servant did not say anything about anybody going to Mount Wutai. Your servant only said 'Mount Wutai'. Perhaps there is someone whom the Empress Dowager cares very much?"

The Empress Dowager paused for a moment and then said, "Very well, let's just say that you did say it that way. He ... he ... that person ... what is he doing on Mount Wutai? Is he in the temple?" Originally, her voice was very calm, but since Hai Laogong mentioned someone on Mount Wutai, she became flustered and exasperated, as if her mind was very troubled.

Hai Laogong said, "That person is indeed in the Qing Liang[70] Temple on Mount Wutai."

The Empress Dowager let out a deep breath and said, "Thank Heaven and thank the Earth, finally I ... I know his ... his whereabouts. He ... he ... he ..." She said the word 'he' three times, and could not continue, because her voice was trembling violently.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly astonished, "Who are they talking

about? Why does the Empress Dowager care about him so much?" He could not help but feeling anxious, "Could he be the Empress Dowager's father? Or her brother? Or perhaps her old lover? That's it, he must be her old lover. If it was her father or brother, it won't be a secret important matter, why should they worry others would hear it? The old turtle has had a hold on her anger, if he wanted her to kill me, the Empress Dowager is afraid of the old turtle, perhaps she would obey him. This is not too good. Luckily *laozi* is here and hear everything, if the old whore dares to kill me, *laozi* will spill out everything in full detail, I will tell His Majesty and their conspiracy will break apart. I am afraid you cannot be considered a hero or a warrior."

Since Pan Gu[71] split the heaven and earth apart, just a very few people ever dared to call the Empress Dowager the 'old whore'. Even those who cursed her secretly in their belly, the number cannot be too many. Wei Xiaobao did not have such fear, even his own mother, whenever she beat him too hard, he would randomly curse her as 'rotten whore' or 'stinky whore'. Luckily his mother was indeed a prostitute, plus everybody in the brothel had always hurled obscenities to each other anyway, so nobody thought too much about it. When his mother heard the curse, she did not get angry, she only hit his little butts 30% harder, while also throwing curse back at him 'little b@stard' or 'little son of a b*tch'. Nothing more than that.

He heard the Empress Dowager was panting anxiously; after half a day she asked, "He ... he ... he ... what is he doing in the Qing Liang Temple?"

"Does Empress Dowager really want to know?" Hai Laogong asked.

"Do you have to ask?" the Empress Dowager retorted, "Of course I want to know."

Hai Laogong said, "My master has left home to become a Buddhist monk."

"Ah!" the Empress Dowager gasped, her breathing became more rapid. "He ... he really has become a monk?" she asked, "You ... you are not deceiving me, are you?"

"Your servant does not dare to deceive the Empress Dowager," Hai Laogong replied, "I don't need to deceive the Empress Dowager."

"Humph," the Empress Dowager snorted, "He is so cruel, he wholeheartedly only ... only thinks about that ... that foxy charmer, so that our country, our empire, our ancestors' hundreds of battles, as well as the established foundation ... are all being thrown to the back of his head. We, mother and son, no ... no longer have any place in his heart."

The more Wei Xiaobao listened, the more astonished he was; he thought, "What country, empire and ancestors' established foundation? The old turtle also calls that person 'my master', so this man ... this man is not the Empress Dowager's old lover?"

Hai Laogong coldly said, "My master has seen through worldly affairs, he has attained great understanding. Ten thousand *li* of rivers and mountains, affection toward sons and daughters, my master said everything is like floating clouds, everything is no longer in his mind."

The Empress Dowager angrily said, "Why didn't he leave home earlier? Why not leave home later? Why did he have to wait for that ... that foxy charmer's death before he left home? In his heart, country, dynasty, forefathers, wife and child, everything added together, still fall short of that foxy charmer; and that's the reason of his abrupt departure. Humph, since he has left, why did he send you to tell me?" The more she talked, the angrier she was; her voice was sharp and gradually growing louder.

Wei Xiaobao was unspeakably terrified, he had a vague feeling that the person those two were talking about, as well as the circumstances surrounding it, were not a small matter.

Hai Laogong said, "My master implored over and over again that whatever your servant say, I must not divulge anything, I must not let the Empress Dowager and His Majesty know about it. My master said: His Majesty has ascended the throne, there is peace throughout the world, there is not a problem on the four oceans, he feels relieved."

In a harsh voice the Empress Dowager said, "Then why did you tell this to me? Originally I did not know, and I did not want to know. Since in his heart he is unable to stop thinking about that foxy charmer, whether his son ascended the throne or not, whether the world is at peace or not, what does it have to do with whether he feels relieved or not?"

Listening to this point, Wei Xiaobao was greatly astonished, "Are they talking about the Emperor's *Papa*? The young emperor's *Papa*, Emperor Shunzhi, has given up his ghost long before the young emperor become the Emperor. Could it be that the Emperor has another *Papa*?" His knowledge on the imperial household and the Palace matter was very limited, other than knowing that the young emperor's father was Emperor Shunzhi, he was completely ignorant about other things. Even if the Empress Dowager and Hai Laogong spoke ten times clearer, he still could not guess the real situation correctly.

Hai Laogong said, "Since my master has already left home, your servant ought to also become a monk in the Qing Liang Temple to attend to my master. However, my master told me that he still have something that is burdening him, and instructed your servant to return to the Capital and investigate something."

"What matter is that?" the Empress Dowager asked.

Hai Laogong said, "My master said, although Consort Donggo ..."

The Empress Dowager angrily said, "In front of me, you must not mention that foxy charmer's name!"

"Turns out that fox-spirit is called Consort Donggo," Wei Xiaobao mused, "She must be one of the Palace's Imperial Concubines. The Empress Dowager 's old lover loved this flirty fox and did not love the Empress Dowager, as a result, the Empress Dowager drank a lot of vinegar [i.e. jealous[72]]."

"Yes," Hai Laogong replied, "Empress Dowager forbids me from mentioning her name, your servant won't mention it."

"What did he say about that foxy charmer?" the Empress Dowager asked.

Hai Laogong said, "Your servant does not understand who the Empress Dowager was referring to. My master has never mentioned these words 'foxy charmer'."

The Empress Dowager angrily said, "Naturally he has never mentioned these words, in his heart, it was always 'Empress Duan Jing'. After that foxy charmer died, he ... he conferred a posthumous title of 'Empress' to her. The flattering servants respectfully proposed to grant her a posthumous name, something like 'Empress Xiao Xian Zhuang He Zhi De Xuan Ren Wen Hui [73]'. But since this title did not contain the words 'heavenly sage', he threw a fit. Also, two servant scholars called Hu Guanglong and Wang Xi compiled the book 'Quotation from Empress Duan Jing' and spread it all over the world, aren't they afraid of disgrace?"

Hai Laogong said, "Empress Dowager is right, after Consort Donggo returned to heaven, your servant should have called her Empress Donggo. About that book 'Quotation from Empress Duan Jing', your servant frequently has a copy by my side,

would Empress Dowager like to take a look?"

"You ... you ... you ..." the Empress Dowager shouted angrily; she took a step forward with labored breathing, but suddenly she seemed to be remembering something. "Hey hey," she laughed, "At that time everybody in the world wanted to curry the Emperor's favor, everybody read the 'Quotation from Empress Duan Jing', the nonsense which those two servants Hu and Wang fabricated. It was considered as 'the heaven's law and earth's principle', something even more important than 'Analects of Confucius' or 'Mencius'. But what about now? Other than a copy in your possession, and perhaps several copies by your master's side, where else can you find this 'Quotations' nonsense?"

Hai Laogong said, "After the Empress Dowager's secret order to ban and destroy this 'Quotation from Empress Duan Jing', who would dare to have the book in his collection? As for my master, although he does not have a single copy by his side, but every single word or sentence that Empress Donggo had ever muttered in her life is firmly recorded in his heart; it definitely surpasses having a copy of 'Quotations' by his side!"

The Empress Dowager said, "He ... he sent you to Beijing to investigate what?"

Hai Laogong replied, "Originally my master instructed me to investigate two matters, but as your servant verified afterwards, those two matters are actually only one."

"What two matters, one matter?" the Empress Dowager asked.

Hai Laogong said, "The first matter was: how did Rong *Wang* [King Rong] die?"

"You ... you mean that foxy charmer's son?" the Empress Dowager asked.

Hai Laogong said, "Your servant was talking about the prince

Empress Duan Jing gave birth to, Prince He Yanrong."

"Humph," the Empress Dowager snorted, "That child only lived not even for four months, he could not be brought up; what's so strange about that?"

Hai Laogong said, "But my master said that Prince Rong contracted acute disease so suddenly. When the summoned court physician examined him, he said that Prince Rong's Foot Yangming Channel of the Stomach, Foot Shaoyin Channel of the Kidney, Foot Taiyin Channel of the Spleen[74], had all been severed, his internal organs had been ruptured; his death was really strange."

"Humph," the Empress Dowager said, "Which court physician has this kind of ability? Most likely it was your fabrication."

Hai Laogong did not deny, he simply continued, "When Empress Duan Jing passed away, everybody thought she was broken hearted over King Rong's death, but after careful investigation, it was not so. She died because someone had used 'cutting off technique' to sever her Yinwei and Yinjiao, two channels."

The Empress Dowager coldly said, "I am surprised that he believed your fantasy."

"At first, my master also did not believe it," Hai Laogong said, "Afterwards, your servant conducted an experiment and show it to him. It was not too long after Empress Duan Jing passed away. Within a month, your servant successively cut the Yinwei and Yinjiao, two main channels, of five palace maids. These five palace maids died with the same symptoms and appearance as when Empress Duan Jing was about to die. If it was only one palace maid, we can say it was a coincidence, but all five palace maids displayed the same condition, my master was convinced and did not have any doubt."

"Hey, it's amazing!" the Empress Dowager said, "Unexpectedly in our Palace there is a great expert like you."

"Many thanks for Empress Dowager's compliment," Hai Laogong said, "Your servant's technique is different from that of the assailant. However, the principle is the same."

The two of them faced each other in silence, nobody said anything for long time. Hai Laogong coughed softly several times. After a while, he said, "My master sent your servant back to the Capital to investigate who murdered Prince Rong and Empress Duan Jing?"

With a cold laugh the Empress Dowager said, "Do you still need to investigate? In our Palace, other than you, who else has the ability to do such thing?"

"There is someone else," Hai Laogong said, "Empress Duan Jing had always treated your servant with kindness; your servant only wish for many good fortune and long life for her; if I had known beforehand that someone was plotting against her, your servant would risk my old life to thoroughly protect her."

"You are very loyal," the Empress Dowager said, "She was very lucky to retain the service of such a good servant."

Hai Laogong sighed and said, "It's a pity your servant is so useless that I failed to protect Empress Duan Jing."

The Empress Dowager icily said, "He worships Buddha in the morning, recites the scripture in the evening, your Empress Duan Jing will be blessed that she will reincarnate sooner from the eighteenth level of hell, and will rise to the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss sooner too; and that's the end of the story." Her voice was full of 'taking joy in calamity and delight in disaster' tone.

"Worshipping Buddha and reciting scripture are not necessarily useful," Hai Laogong said, "However, the saying 'virtue has its reward, evil has its retribution' is always true."

After a short pause, he continued very slowly, "If the evil is not avenged yet, the time has yet to come." The Empress Dowager only snorted.

Hai Laogong said, "Reporting to Empress Dowager: my master instructed your servant to investigate two matters, your servant found out that these two matters are actually one. Who would have imagined that inadvertently I found two more matters?"

"The matters you are investigating are just too many," the Empress Dowager said, "What else did you find?"

Hai Laogong said, "The first one is concerning Consort Zhen."

The Empress Dowager laughed coldly and said, "The younger sister of foxy charmer is simply a little foxy charmer. Why do you mention her?"

"When my master left the Palace, he left behind a letter saying that he would never return," Hai Laogong said, "Your Majesties, the Emperor's Grandmother and the Empress Dowager, were of the opinion that a country must not be without a ruler even for a day. Thereupon you proclaimed to the world that my master had died. In the present age, the number of persons who know this big secret is only six, namely Your Majesties, my master, Reverend Yulin, who followed my master shaving his head, and two servants who wait upon my masters. One of these two servants is the Imperial Bodyguard Chief Hebacha, who at this moment has also left home and became a monk on Mount Wutai, and the other one is your servant Hai Tianfu."

Listening to this point, Wei Xiaobao had started to understand; turned out the one the Empress Dowager referred to as 'he' and the one Hai Laogong referred to as 'my master' was precisely Emperor Shunzhi. The world only knew that he had passed away, but actually because his beloved imperial

concubine had died, in his extreme grief he had become a Buddhist monk at the Qing Liang Temple on Mount Wutai. As for the reason behind the imperial concubine's death, from what Hai Laogong has said, it seemed to be because of a martial art expert sent by the Empress Dowager to kill her. He could not help but feeling very proud of himself, thinking: "The old turtle says there are only six people in this world who are privy to this big secret, he would not know that there is another one, Wei Xiaobao. Now there are seven." But his self-satisfaction was short lived, soon afterwards it turned into dread. At first he was feeling somewhat secure in the knowledge that he had a backing; he thought that if he had to argue with Hai Laogong in the presence of the Empress Dowager, he would not necessarily lose to the old turtle. Yet this moment he knew that things had turned to the worst for him. If those two find out that he was eavesdropping, even if Hai Laogong did not kill him, the Empress Dowager definitely would not let him off. He heard two light 'clack, clack' noise; unexpectedly it was his own teeth chattering, hastily he bit hard to stop the chatter. Luckily right this moment Hai Laogong was coughing, only the sound of his labored breathing and occasional cough was heard in the quiet night.

A moment later, Hai Laogong said, "At that time Consort Zhen committed suicide to follow her master, everybody in the imperial court commended her to no end. But there were many people who quietly said Consort Zhen was forced by the Empress Dowager to die the sacrificial death; suicide was not her original intention."

The Empress Dowager said, "Sooner or later those leaderless, uncontrollable rebellious ministers will have to be dealt with."

"But what they said is not entirely incorrect," Hai Laogong said, "Consort Zhen did not willingly and gladly committed suicide."

"Are you saying that I forced Consort Zhen to die?" the Empress Dowager said.

"This word 'force' can be omitted altogether," Hai Laogong said.

"What are you talking about?" the Empress Dowager asked.

Hai Laogong said, “Consort Zhen was murdered, not forced to commit suicide. Your servant had interrogated in details the undertaker, to find out about Consort Zhen’s condition when she was prepared for burial. The bones in her entire body were broken into one *cun* pieces, even her skull had become fragments. I seem to remember the type of skill to kill people this way is called ‘Transforming Bones Soft Palm’. Would Empress Dowager tell me if this is so?”

“How do I know?” the Empress Dowager said.

“Your servant heard that there is such skill ‘Transforming Bones Soft Palm’ in the world,” Hai Laogong said, “When someone is hit, there won’t be anything unusual on his entire body, but after a year or half a year, the bones in his body would slowly disintegrate. However, the assassin who killed Consort Zhen evidently has not mastered this skill to proficiency yet. At first, when the undertaker was tidying up Consort Zhen’s appearance, he did not see anything unusual, but when he put the body into the coffin that night, suddenly the body felt like it did not have any bones at all, the entire body turned soft. He was scared because he had never seen anything like it, he only knew that the corpse had undergone a change, but at that time he did not dare to say anything. Your servant threatened and bribed, I had used I don’t know how many types of tortures before he finally revealed the actual facts. After the practitioner of this skill ‘Transforming Bones Soft Palm’ hit people, two, three days later the victim’s bones disintegrate, I am afraid his proficiency cannot be considered completely profound. Empress Dowager, based on your sacred

judgment, won't you agree with me?"

The Empress Dowager gloomily said, "Although it can't be considered profound, somehow it accomplished its purpose."

"Naturally it is very useful, (cough … cough …) very useful!" Hai Laogong said, "After killing Consort Zhen, he also killed Empress Xiao Kang."

"His granny," Wei Xiaobao thought, "This old emperor's empresses are so many; there is another Empress Xiao Kang. Perhaps the number of his empresses is more than our young misses at the Lovely Spring Courtyard."

The Empress Dowager's voice trembled as she said, "You … why did you mention Empress Xiao Kang's name?"

Wei Xiaobao did not know that Empress Xiao Kang was Kangxi's birth mother; hearing the huge change in the Empress Dowager's voice, he only felt strange, but could not figure out the reason. He heard Hai Laogong said, "The undertaker who prepared Empress Xiao Kang for burial was the same one who also prepared Consorts Donggo and Zhen."

"That undertaker deserves to die," the Empress Dowager said, "What other rubbish did he say? He falsely accused people in the Palace's matters; for his crime he ought to be executed along with all his relatives."

Hai Laogong said, "If the Empress Dowager wanted to kill him, now it is too late."

"Have you killed him first?" the Empress Dowager asked.

"It's not that," Hai Laogong said, "More than two years ago, your servant sent him to the Qing Liang Temple on Mount Wutai to report everything he knew to my master, and then I told him to go far away into the uncivilized territory and live incognito there, to avoid the disaster of him being murdered."

With a trembling voice the Empress Dowager said, "You … you

… what a sinister scheme!”

“The one with sinister scheme is someone else,” Hai Laogong said, “Your servant is ashamed of being inferior to that person.”

The Empress Dowager was silent for half a day before asking, “You came to see me tonight, what is your intention?”

“Your servant wanted to inquire of the Empress Dowager of one matter, so I can report it back to my master,” Hai Laogong said, "Empress Duan Jing, Empress Xiao Kang, Consort Zhen, Prince Rong, four people all died an unnatural death; consequently, my master also abandoned his position and left home to become a monk. The person responsible for this evil scheme is a martial art expert within the Palace. Braving death, your servant comes here to inquire of the Empress Dowager: who is this martial art expert? Your servant is getting old, my eyes are blind, plus I am suffering from an incurable disease; I am like a candle in the wind, yet if I cannot investigate and find out the truth, I will not die with eyes closed."

The Empress Dowager coldly said, "Since you have been blind early on, it does not matter whether you die with eyes closed or not."

Hai Laogong said, "Although your servant is blind, my heart is bright as snow."

The Empress Dowager said, "If your heart is bright as snow, why do you need to come here and ask me?"

"It's better if I can understand it clearly," Hai Laogong replied, "So that I won't mistreat the innocents. These past several months, your servant has diligently doing some investigation, I want to find out who is this martial art master who is hiding in the Palace? At first it was an extremely difficult investigation, but by lucky coincidence, I found out that His Majesty knows martial art."

The Empress Dowager laughed coldly and said, "His Majesty

knows martial art, so what? Are you saying that he killed his own mother?"

"Sin, sin!" Hai Laogong said, "This kind of disobedience to parents must not be even mentioned. If your servant has ever said such thing, when I die I will enter the hell where my tongue will be pulled out; if I have ever had that thought, when I die I will not escape the suffering of my brain being scoured in the underworld." He coughed several times before continuing, "Your servant has a little eunuch by my side, his name is Xiao Guizi ..."

Wei Xiaobao's heart turned cold, "The old turtle is starting to talk about me." He heard Hai Laogong continued, " ... he is about a year or two younger than His Majesty. His Majesty is very fond of him, every day they were having martial art and wrestling match, and practicing martial art together. Xiao Guizi learned martial art from your servant. Although it's not much, but for a child his age, it can be considered not easy." Hearing Hai Laogong complimenting him, Wei Xiaobao could not help by feeling very proud of himself.

The Empress Dowager said, "A famous teacher trains a fine student, there are no poor soldiers under a good general."

"Thank you very much for Empress Dowager's compliment [orig. 'golden mouth']," Hai Laogong said, "However, when this Xiao Guizi fought His Majesty, nine times out of ten he would lose. No matter what kind of martial art your servant taught him, His Majesty 's martial art skill was always a notch higher than his. It seems that the *Shifu* who taught His Majesty martial art is a lot better than your servant. Your servant had thought it over, the only martial art master in the Palace is this expert. As long as I can find this expert, then the assassin who killed two empresses, one imperial consort and one prince won't be difficult to trace."

“I see," the Empress Dowager said, "You talk round and round

in circle is just so that you can tell me this."

Hai Laogong said, "The Empress Dowager said, 'A famous teacher trains a fine student'; the other side of the coin is also true, 'A fine student must come from a famous teacher'. His Majesty is able to use eight by eight, sixty-four styles 'Ba Gua Roaming Dragon Palm', the person who taught him this palm technique will most likely also know the ‘Transforming Bones Soft Palm’."

"Have you found out the martial art master's identity?" the Empress Dowager asked.

"I have," Hai Laogong replied.

The Empress Dowager laughed coldly, "You are such a crafty schemer," she said, "You taught Xiao Guizi to practice martial art with His Majesty for the last half a year or so, is to find out His Majesty's *Shifu*."

Hai Laogong sighed, "I don't have any choice," he said, "Xiao Guizi is a sinister and ruthless little scoundrel. It was he who used poison and blinded your servant's eyes. If I was not considering that I have to investigate this important matter to find the absolute truth, I would have not let this scoundrel to live until today."

The Empress Dowager laughed aloud and said, "What a clever child that Xiao Guizi; he poisoned your eyes blind. Very good, just wonderful. Tomorrow I am going to reward him well."

"Many thanks, Empress Dowager," Hai Laogong said, "If Empress Dowager would conduct an elaborate funeral for him, in the underworld Xiao Guizi will be very grateful for Empress Dowager's great kindness."

"You have already killed him?" the Empress Dowager asked.

Hai Laogong said, "Your servant has exercised patience toward him for a long, long time; after this, I won't have any other use

for him."

Wei Xiaobao was shocked and angered at the same time, he thought, "The old turtle has known all along that I am not Xiao Guizi, he also knew early on that I poisoned his eyes blind. Turns out he is only exploiting *laozi*; this is called striking vicious blow slowly. He taught me martial art was only so that he could see His Majesty's martial art. His granny, if I had known it, I should have not tell him His Majesty's martial art in detail. Your granny, the old turtle thinks I am dead, but *laozi* is clearly still alive. Later I am going to play ghost and scare you until you piss in your pants."

Hai Laogong sighed and said, "My master has always been short-tempered, whatever he wants must be done. It's a pity that although he was the Son of Heaven, his beloved was murdered by others, and he was helpless to save her life. Even after becoming a monk, my master can never forget Consort Donggo. When your servant left the Qing Liang Temple to return to the Palace, my master has written with his own hand an imperial edict and handed it over to your servant. He wanted your servant to investigate and find out who murdered Consort Donggo, no, Empress Duan Jing. He ordered your servant to execute the assailant on the spot."

"Humph," the Empress Dowager said, "He has become a monk, can he write any imperial edict? Those who have left home must not think about killing and harming people, don’t you think it’s not fit of his calling?”

Hai Laogong said, “Buddhists also pay particular attention to karma and retribution. Those who harm others will not have a good end. However, your servant has damaged the passage through which my vital energy circulates when training martial art, resulting in incessant coughing and shortage of breath; my entire body is ill, and now I am blind, it’s even more hopeless for me.”

“That’s right,” the Empress Dowager said, “You are sick and blind; even if you have this secret imperial edict, how are you going to execute it?”

Hai Laogong sighed and said, “I can’t, I can’t! Your servant ask to be excused, I am leaving now.” Finished speaking, he turned around and slowly walked toward the exit.

Wei Xiaobao felt as if a large stone was being lifted up of his heart; he mused, “When the old turtle has left, I will be alright. He only knows that I have died, he won’t come looking for me anymore. *Laozi* will slip out the Palace gate early tomorrow morning; in case the old turtle is looking for me, *laozi* will assume your identity, will take your surname, from now on I am Hai Xiaobao.”

“Wait a moment!” the Empress Dowager said, “Hai Tianfu, where are you going?”

“Your servant has reported everything clearly to the Empress Dowager,” Hai Laogong said, “I am going back to wait for death.”

“The matter he entrusted to you,” the Empress Dowager said, “Aren’t you going to do it?”

“Your servant has the desire yet lacking the strength to do so,” Hai Laogong said, “Moreover, I do not have the guts to start a rebellion today.”

“Hey, hey,” the Empress Dowager laughed, “You are very understanding, your waiting upon us these many years is not in vain.”

“Yes, yes!” Hai Laogong said, “Many thanks for Empress Dowager’s grace. This grievance is as deep as the ocean floor; it has to wait until His Majesty is older before it can be vindicated.” He coughed twice, and then said, “The way he dealt with the arrest of Oboi is very brilliant. His Majesty’s own mother was murdered, before too long, His Majesty will

definitely deal with this matter. It's a pity … it's a pity your servant will not live until that time, I cannot wait that long."

The Empress Dowager took several steps forward and harsly said, "Hai Tianfu, come back here."

"Yes," Hai Laogong said, "What instruction does the Empress Dowager have for me?"

The Empress Dowager sternly said, "Just now you speak nonsense to me, this … this utterly absurd talk, have you … have you told His Majesty?" Her voice trembled, she seemed to be extremely agitated.

Hai Laogong said, "Tomorrow early in the morning I am going to report to His Majesty; it's just that … that I was itching to get on with it tonight that I came to report to the Empress Dowager first."

"Very good, very good," the Empress Dowager said.

Suddenly the sound of a strong gust of wind arose, followed by loud 'Bang! Bang!' noise. Wei Xiaobao was startled; he could not restrain himself from craning his neck to look. He saw the Empress Dowager was circling around Hai Laogong with amazingly swift footwork, palm strike by palm strike she attacked Hai Laogong. Surprisingly, Hai Laogong held his ground and counterattacked with his palms. Wei Xiaobao's shock was not mild; "How can the Empress Dowager fight the old turtle? Turns out the Empress Dowager also know martial art."

Each one of the Empress Dowager's palm strike generated a strong gust of wind, a sign that her palm carried an extremely violent power. Hai Laogong's two feet were nailed on the ground, he met each palm strike with his own palm, but his palm did not generate any noise. Yet after fighting for a long time, Empress Dowager did not seem to gain any advantage over him. Suddenly she leaped up and delivered a downward strike with both palms from the air. Hai Laogong flipped his left

palm over to meet the incoming attack, while delivering a blow with his right palm toward the Empress Dowager's abdomen. 'Clap!' the palms collided with each other. The Empress Dowager flew backward. Hai Laogong staggered, his body swayed and he had to get hold of a stump to steady himself.

In a stern voice the Empress Dowager shouted, "Good servant, you … you … deceived me; it was Shaolin … Shaolin martial art you taught Xiao Guizi, but you are from Kongtong Pai."

Gasping for breath, Hai Laogong replied, "I don't dare, we are even! The Empress Dowager taught Wudang Pai's martial art to His Majesty, with the purpose of fooling your servant. But … but that 'Transforming Bones Soft Palm' is Snake Island's martial art; your servant has known about it for several years."

Wei Xiaobao had to think hard before he could understand. "His granny," he mused, "The old turtle is very crafty, he taught me some 'Big Grappling Technique' and some 'Great Compassion Great Sorrow Thousand-Leaf Hand', which are Shaolin Pai's martial art, so that the Empress Dowager would think that he is from Shaolin, but actually he is from that hot piece mama Kongtong Pai. Too bad Empress Dowager's fake Wudang Pai's 'Ba Gua Roaming Dragon Palm' could not deceive the old turtle." He also thought, "Turns out His Majesty's martial art was taught by the Empress Dowager."

Suddenly cold sweat appeared on his back, "Aiyo, not good!" he mused, "The Empress Dowager knows the 'Transforming Bones Soft Palm', could it be … could it be that those four people were killed by the Empress Dowager? Aiyo! It's alright if it were someone else, but the Emperor's own mother was killed by her. If Hai Laogong told the Emperor, won't it be a terrible disaster? If His Majesty did not kill the Empress Dowager, the Empress Dowager will definitely kill His Majesty. What … what should I do?" His only thought was to break into a run immediately, to

escape this battleground as soon as he can, and then notify the Emperor, telling him to be extremely careful. But he was so scared that his body felt limp and painful; he desperately wanted to run away, but his feet seemed to be nailed fast to the ground that he was unable to move even for half a *fen*.

He heard the Empress Dowager said, “Since it has come to this, do you still think you can escape with your life tonight?”

Hai Laogong replied, “Empress Dowager is free to summon the imperial bodyguards. The more people come the better, then your servant can speak all kinds of things in their ears; at least one of them can convey the truth to His Majesty’s ears.”

“Humph,” the Empress Dowager coldly laughed, “You have calculated everything.” She spoke very slowly, while constantly regulating her breathing.

“Empress Dowager must take care of your sacred body,” Hai Laogong said, “Do not damage your vital passages.”

“You must take care yourself!” the Empress Dowager said.

Originally, Hai Laogong’s martial art skill was higher than the Empress Dowager’s, but since he was blind, he was not her match. However, a few years previously he had ascertained from the undertaker that the killer of Consort Donggo and Consort Zhen had used the ‘Transforming Bones Soft Palm’, a sinister and ruthless technique, which was secretly taught only by the master of the Snake Island off the coast of Liaodong peninsula. It’s just that at that time he did not know who the killer was. Thereupon he took the dangerous risk of secretly learned a special technique to counter the ‘Transforming Bones Soft Palm’. Although his body suffered major injury, he had actually mastered the technique.

Afterwards, Wei Xiaobao and Emperor Kangxi practiced martial art together. Hai Laogong speculated that the person teaching the Emperor martial art was the assailant who murdered

Consort Donggo, Empress Xiao Kang, and the others; therefore, sooner or later he would have to face the great battle. He was fully aware that Wei Xiaobao killed Xiao Guizi and poisoned his eyes blind. Yet he let Wei Xiaobao to accompany him as Xiao Guizi, thinking that this child was very young, plus they were total strangers to each other, so there must be someone else behind him. He tried to lure Wei Xiaobao in every way to reveal who had sent him here, since he believed that that person most likely was the murderer. However, Wei Xiaobao was not sent by anybody to begin with, so he really did not have anything to reveal; otherwise, even if he was ten times smarter, he was indeed very young and his experience very shallow, how could he able to evade Hai Laogong's tactful inquiries?

Although Hai Laogong's inquiry did not bear any fruit, he figured the two of them could play the game, thereupon he taught Wei Xiaobao martial art. But his teachings were ridden with errors and omissions, he deliberately let the opponent to think that he was from Shaolin Pai, and that his martial art skill was average. As he made his move this time, the Empress Dowager indeed had fallen into his scheme.

About six months ago, the Empress Dowager had guessed that Hai Laogong was from Shaolin Pai, yet Hai Laogong already knew that her Wudang Pai martial art was fake. Two people, one had seeing eyes, the other blind, they came from opposite school of thought in term of martial art study. Hai Laogong knew his opponent's situation very well, yet the Empress Dowager had an incorrect assessment of her opponent. It was not because the Empress Dowager had a poor knowledge and experience, it was simply because Hai Laogong had found the facts from the undertaker's mouth, while all along the Empress Dowager was in the dark. Furthermore, in Hai Tianfu's heart, he had already considered the person who taught the Emperor martial art as his mortal enemy, while it was only now that the Empress Dowager realized Hai Tianfu intended to bring her to

her doom. Otherwise, she could have issued an imperial edict to the imperial bodyguards to put Hai Tianfu to death; she did not need to personally deal with him.

Hai Laogong thought that since his eyes were blind, he must provoke the opponent to strike first and only then would he be able to wait leisurely for the enemy to exhaust herself, and thus with several moves he could seize the victory. It so happened that after talking for half a day, the Empress Dowager did not reveal anything; in the end, he was unable to ascertain who had killed Consort Donggo, Empress Xiao Kang and the others.

The ‘Transforming Bones Soft Palm’ was a ruthless, heretical and vicious technique from an unorthodox martial art school; by conventional reasoning, it may be assumed that unless it is trained for approximately twenty years, the practitioner won’t reach the proficiency level. Empress Dowager was the daughter of Chief Horqin of Borjigit Clan, her parents were of a royal background, for several generations her family had held high-ranking office in royal court. When she was still a maiden, it was extremely difficult for her to step out of her mansion even for a single step. From her childhood, she was waited upon by countless wet nurses and maidservants; how could she ventured far away to the dangerous Snake Island and learn this kind of heretical martial art? Even if she wanted to learn martial art, she would have learned some ‘eight-section brocade’, or ‘five-animal exercise’ and the like, some superficial techniques to strengthen her body; it was inconceivable that she would learn the ‘Transforming Bones Soft Palm’. It was more likely that among her trusted aides, the court eunuchs and palace maids, there was a martial art master who received the Empress Dowager’s order to make the move on her behalf. Who would have thought that as soon as Hai Laogong mentioned that he was going to report to the Emperor, the Empress Dowager became anxious and without careful consideration she went into action by personally confronting the enemy? This way, not

only the Empress Dowager admitted that she was the murderer of those four people, but as the three palms collided, she had received serious internal injury. Hai Laogong painstakingly planned and prepared this mission for several years, once he saw the mission accomplished, he could not help but feeling greatly relieved.

The Empress Dowager's injury was indeed not light; several times she tried to regulate her breathing, but always failed. She slowly said, "Hai Tianfu, you love to groundlessly fabricate rumors and talk nonsense. Although His Majesty is young, he is very clear-headed. Let's see if he would believe you, or he would believe me."

"Naturally at first His Majesty will not believe your servant," Hai Laogong replied, "Most likely he will issue an imperial edict to have your servant killed immediately. However, after a few years, he may think carefully, the more he thinks, the more likely that he gain a clearer understanding. Empress Dowager, your clan has always enjoy honor and glory for generations, the empresses of the Founding Emperor, as well as my master's, all came from your mansion. It's a pity that this glory, splendor, wealth and rank will be finished under Kangxi's imperial court."

"Humph," the Empress Dowager snorted; she coldly said, "Very good, very good!"

Hai Laogong continued, "My master ordered your servant, as soon as the murderer is found, no matter who it was, I am to immediately execute him. It's a pity your servant's is lacking, I am not the Empress Dowager's match, without any better option, I must leave this place and submit a report to His Majesty." Finished speaking, he slowly walked toward the exit.

The Empress Dowager secretly cursed her luck; just when she was about leap and attack, suddenly a gust of wind came by; Hai Laogong abruptly turned around and charged toward her with a fierce palm strike. Hai Laogong had received Emperor

Shunzhi's order to execute Consort Donggo's murderer, and he was determined to accomplish this task. He was talking about submitting a report to the Emperor and other things, his main objective was to harass the Empress Dowager's mind, to incite her anxiety and anger, so that she could not regulate her breathing, and thus he could launch the 'ten thousand catties thunderbolt' strike.

Although this strike was noiseless, it carried the entire power he cultivated all his life. Just now, by listening attentively to the Empress Dowager's voice, he was able to locate her position with accuracy within a few *cun*; once he launched a palm strike, it went straight toward the acupoint on the pit of her stomach. The Empress Dowager did not anticipate he was able to move this swiftly; she moved sideways wanting to evade, as long as she was able to move quickly several times, this wicked traitor was a blind man, he would not be able to pinpoint her exact location, and then the battle would be under her control, for other than parrying the attack with his palm, he would not have the capability to counterattack. Who would have thought that as soon as she moved, Hai Laogong's palm had already arrived? The pressure was so strong that she could not even breathe, and had no choice but sending her strength to her right palm to meet the attack. She had planned to step back immediately after delivering the strike, but Hai Laogong's palm carried an enormous sucking force, which rendered her helpless to pull back. She had no choice but transmitting all her strength to her right palm and thus engaging him in an internal energy battle.

Feeling the opponent's internal strength surging in a steady stream, Hai Laogong was rejoicing secretly; his eyes were blind, if he had to fight a moving battle, he would be in a very disadvantageous situation, however, in internal energy battle, it did not matter whether he could see or was blind. Since the Empress Dowager had been injured, her *chi* circulation was obstructed, she could not recover even in three quarters of an

hour. In this kind of internal energy battle, he must try to drain her strength, so that she would be paralyzed and die. Therefore, he sent out Yin force with left palm and Yang force with his right. After battling for a while, Yin and Yang were gradually reversed; now the left palm was sending Yang force, while the right sending Yin.

To Wei Xiaobao who was watching, it only looked like Empress Dowager 's one palm was balancing Hai Laogong's two palms, there was not the slightest bit of danger. He did not know that Hai Laogong's palm strength was like a stone mill; it slowly turned just like stone mill grinding grain into powder, grinding the Empress Dowager's internal energy bit by bit. Wei Xiaobao was hiding behind the fake rocks, he was afraid Empress Dowager might detect his presence. Occasionally he would stick out his head to see, and would immediately hide again, suddenly he saw a flashing white light, hastily he looked out and saw the three palms of the two people were still locked to each other, however, a short blade had appeared in the Empress Dowager's left hand, the dagger was moving slowly toward Hai Laogong's abdomen. He was ecstatic; "Wonderful, wonderful!" he cheered in his heart, "Very soon the old turtle will return to the damn heaven."

What happened was: realizing the strangeness of the opponent's palm strength, the Empress Dowager's left hand quietly fished a white moth-antennae steel spike and slowly pulled it out, the spike's point gradually moved toward Hai Laogong's lower abdomen. However, when the spike was about a *chi* away from the opponent's lower abdomen, she was unable to push it farther. In the meantime, the 'Yin Yang Grindstone' force from Hai Laogong's palms was getting stronger and faster, the Empress Dowager's single palm had already unable to resist the enemy, she felt her right palm was gradually losing its strength and became limp and painful, so very soon she would have to use her left palm to help her right.

Originally she wanted to thrust the moth-antennae spike slowly so that it would not generate any wind and thus the enemy would not be able to detect it; however, this moment her right palm was almost devoid of any strength. No longer caring whether Hai Laogong would hear it or not, she sent all her strength to her left hand and thrust hard, with the hope that the moth-antennae spike would pierce its target. Who would have thought that she was unable to move her left hand even for half a *cun*. In the quiet night, there was a soft 'drip, drip' noise; it was the blood from the severed four fingers on Hai Laogong's left hand, which flowed out continuously and dripped down to the ground. The more Hai Laogong sent the internal energy to his hand, the faster the blood gushed out from his wound.

Under the moonlight, Wei Xiaobao saw the moth-antennae spike was flickering continually, sometimes it flashed on his face, an indication that the Empress Dowager's left hand was trembling incessantly. The white light flickered faster and faster, yet all along the moth-antennae spike was unable to reach Hai Laogong's lower abdomen.

A moment later, Wei Xiaobao noticed that the moth-antennae spike was being slowly pulled back. Wei Xiaobao was shocked. "Aiyo, not good!" he mused, "The Empress Dowager is going to lose to the old turtle. If I don't leave now, what am I waiting for?" He slowly turned around and step by step walked toward the exit. With each step he took, he knew that he was one step farther from the danger, so he felt relieved, and thus his steps was getting faster. Finally he reached the gate and was about to reach out the door knocker when suddenly he heard 'Aah!' from behind him, the Empress Dowager let out a long scream. "It's bad!" Wei Xiaobao mused, "The Empress Dowager has been killed by the old turtle."

"Empress Dowager," he heard Hai Laogong coldly say, "The oil

of your lamp is about to dry out. In the time needed to burn an incense stick, your strength will be depleted and you are going to die. Unless right now someone suddenly appear and attack my back so that I cannot resist, only then would he be able to kill me."

Wei Xiaobao was about to open the door and dash out, suddenly hearing Hai Laogong's voice, he thought, "Turns out the Empress Dowager is not dead yet! The old turtle is right, both of his hands are locked with the Empress Dowager's hand, if I stab his back, how can the old turtle take his hand and block? He was the one who said it, don't blame other people."

Before his eyes was precisely a golden opportunity like beating a dog drowning in the water; if he did not seize this readily available convenience, he would become a human being in vain. Wei Xiaobao was very fond of gambling; even if the chance was fifty-fifty, he would still gamble. If a gambling opportunity arose, where he could cheat by playing tricks so that his chance of winning was 90% or a 100%, even if his life was at stake, definitely he would not let this opportunity pass. If someone wanted him to take chances to save the Empress Dowager, he would not dare to do that no matter what. But as he heard Hai Laogong announcing his own weak point, which was the same as holding out his own hands to be tied, or stretching his own neck to be chopped, it was as if a fat meat was placed in front of his mouth; how could he not swallow?

He reached down and pulled the dagger from his boot; with quick steps he rushed toward Hai Laogong's back, while shouting, "Old Turtle, stop harming the Empress Dowager!" Raising his dagger, he fiercely stabbed it down on his back.

Hai Laogong let out a long laugh and called out, "Little demon, you have fallen into my trick!" His left foot kicked backward, 'Bang!' The pit of Wei Xiaobao's stomach was hit and he was sent flying several *zhang* back.

Turned out when he was having an internal energy battle with the Empress Dowager, Hai Laogong was confident that victory was at hand. Suddenly he heard someone was walking away from behind the rockery, the footsteps sounded very familiar; immediately he recognized it to be Wei Xiaobao. Unexpectedly this little demon did not die after being hit by his palm. Hai Laogong was rather astonished; he was afraid that if Wei Xiaobao summoned the imperial bodyguards to help the Empress Dowager, it would really 'spoil the ship for half a penny worth of tar'. Hit upon an inspiration, he cried out, luring Wei Xiaobao to come and attack his back.

Wei Xiaobao's experience in facing the enemy and adapt himself to changes was really too little, as expected, he fell into his trick. Hai Laogong's kick had hit the pit of Wei Xiaobao's stomach. He flew through the air as if soaring through the clouds or mounting the fog, vomited a mouthful of blood.

When Hai Laogong kicked with his left foot, he had already anticipated that as his strength was reduced, the Empress Dowager would exploit the instant the pressing force went void by sending her left palm to strike his lower abdomen. Therefore, after kicking Wei Xiaobao, without thinking he sent out his right palm forward to protect his lower abdomen. Suddenly there was a cold sensation on the center of his palm, followed by a burst of severe pain on his lower abdomen. The Empress Dowager's platinum-plated moth-antennae steel spike pierced through his palm and entered his lower abdomen. After all, he was greatly disadvantaged by not able to see anything; although he had foreseen that the Empress Dowager would exploit the loophole by launching a counterattack, he could not see that the attack came not in the form of palm strike, but an extremely sharp weapon instead. As his lower abdomen was punctured by the moth-antennae spike, he gathered his strength on his left palm and shook the Empress Dowager several steps back.

The Empress Dowager landed on her left foot, but immediately leaped several more *zhang* backward. She felt her *chi* and blood were bubbling up inside her chest that she almost fainted. Afraid that Hai Laogong would seize this chance to attack, she slowly withdrew several more steps and stood against the wall.

Hai Laogong roared in laughter and called out, "Your luck is good! Your luck is good!" 'Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!' he sent three palm strikes while throwing himself forward at the same time. The Empress Dowager wanted to leap to the right to evade, but her legs were limp and painful, she tumbled down to the ground. She heard a 'splotch!', half of the row of flower rack were pushed down by Hai Laogong's palm strength. The Empress Dowager's muscles were weary and her strength depleted, she was unable to move a single step. In her fright, she saw Hai Laogong's body was sprawled face down on the flower rack, unmoving.

Propping herself up, the Empress Dowager wanted to stand up, but her limbs felt like cotton, her entire body was weak. While she was thinking of calling one of the palace maids, she heard faint noise of people coming near. She thought, "My dialogue and fight with this wicked thief were not loud, but before his death he was shouting and yelling, and overthrowing the flower rack; it must have alerted the imperial bodyguards on duty. Those guards will be here in no time, seeing me lying in here with two dead eunuchs, one old and one young, what a scandal will it be?" Mustering all her strength, she wanted to circulate her *chi* thru her body, but all along she failed to do so.

She heard the noise of the guards was getting near; while feeling very anxious, suddenly someone came over and said, "Empress Dowager, are you, Senior, well? Let me help you up." It was precisely that little eunuch Xiao Guizi.

The Empress Dowager was pleasantly surprised, she said, "You ... you ... are not killed ... by that evil man's kick?"

"His kick did not kill me," Wei Xiaobao replied. When he was kicked by Hai Laogong just now, he landed on a flowering shrub and spurted quite a bit of blood. After calming himself, he made an effort to stand up. Seeing Hai Laogong was lying face down motionless on the flower rack, he hastily hid himself behind a tree. He picked up a rock and threw it toward Hai Laogong, 'smack!' it hit the back of Hai Laogong's head, but Hai Laogong did not stir at all. Wei Xiaobao was ecstatic, "The old turtle is dead!" he thought. But he was still scared, and thus did not dare to come near. For a moment he was unsure of what to do: shall he run away and escape, or come back and help the Empress Dowager? Suddenly he heard the hubbub as a lot of people rushing near. If he ran out, he would definitely bump into them, therefore, he went toward the Empress Dowager and stretched out his hand to help her up.

"Good child," the Empress Dowager happily said, "Quickly help me in to rest."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied. Half dragging and half carrying, he stumbled to help her enter her room and helped her laying on the bed. His own legs felt limp and painful, so he dropped himself on the thick carpet, while gasping for breath.

“You may lie down here,” the Empress Dowager said, “When someone is coming, you must not make any sound.”

“Yes!” Wei Xiaobao said.

A moment later, he heard clatters of footsteps, a lot of people were rushing in from the outside. The flame from lanterns and torches illuminated the room from the window lattice. Someone said, “Aiyo, there is a dead eunuch in here!” Another man said, “It’s Hai Laogong from the Catering Department.” One of them raised his voice and said, “Reporting to the Empress Dowager: other than the situation in the garden, wishing the Empress Dowager ten thousand good fortune and peace like gold.” By saying that, he was actually inquiring the safety of the Empress

Dowager.”

“Other than what situation?” the Empress Dowager asked.

As soon as she said that, the imperial bodyguards and court eunuchs outside let out a deep breath. As long as the Empress Dowager was safe, although the Palace of Compassion and Peace was in a mess, it would not be too great of an offense for them. The leader of the imperial bodyguards said, “It seems like there was a fight between the court eunuchs, not a big deal. Empress Dowager please retire for the night, tomorrow your servants will investigate and submit a detailed report.”

“Very well,” the Empress Dowager replied.

They heard the imperial bodyguard chief lowered his voice and quietly ordered his men to take Hai Laogong’s body out. Another man also said in a low voice, “There is a little palace maid’s body in here. Ah! This little palace maid is not dead, she is only fainted.”

The imperial bodyguard chief said, “Take both of them away, we will question her when she regains her consciousness.”

The Empress Dowager said, “Is there any little palace maid? Take her into my room.” She was afraid when she regained her consciousness, Rui Chu would reveal what had happened that night.

Someone outside complied, a court eunuch carried the little palace maid Rui Chu into the room and gently lay her down on the floor. He kowtowed to the Empress Dowager and then withdrew.

By this time, all palace maids serving the Empress Dowager were already awakened, they all stood waiting outside the room, without the Empress Dowager's summon, nobody dared to enter on their own initiative. The Empress Dowager heard the imperial bodyguards and the court eunuchs gradually left; she said, "You all may go back to sleep, I don't need your

service tonight." The palace maids complied and immediately left.

The fact that the Empress Dowager knew martial art was a secret, even the palace maid attending her personally did not know. When she trained every morning and evening, without her orders, no court eunuch or palace maid was allowed to enter her room even for one step. Even touching the door curtain was strictly prohibited.

The Empress Dowager regulated her *chi* for a while. In the meantime, Wei Xiaobao's strength had gradually returned that he was able to sit up. A moment later, he was able to stand up. The Empress Dowager knew that Hai Laogong's kick on the pit of his stomach was very heavy, but this little eunuch unexpectedly was able to move freely, he was even able to help her back to her room. She wondered what kind of martial art he practiced? Thereupon she asked, "Other than with Hai Tianfu, who else did you learn martial art from?"

Wei Xiaobao replied, "Your servant only learned martial art from that evil old man for several months. Most of the martial art he taught was probably bogus. This man was very wicked, he often bragged of killing me."

"Hmm," the Empress Dowager said, "His eyes, did you poison him blind?"

"That old fellow day in and day out always cursed the Empress Dowager behind your back," Wei Xiaobao said, "He also cursed His Majesty. Your servant was unbearably angry, but has no ability to kill him, so I had to ... I had to ..."

"How did he curse me and His Majesty?" the Empress Dowager asked.

"His words were very undisciplined and out of control," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Your servant did not dare to remember it in my heart, as soon as I hear it, I forget. I have already

forgotten everything early on, and did not think about it anymore."

The Empress Dowager nodded, "You are a very smart child," she said, "Tonight, what brought you here?"

Wei Xiaobao said, “Your servant was sleeping on my bed, I heard the evil old fellow opened the door and went out. I was afraid he was going to do something to harm me, so I quietly followed behind him, all the way to this place.”

The Empress Dowager slowly said, “All the nonsense he told me, you have heard everything.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Everything that the evil old fellow said, your servant always regard as a fart. Em … Empress Dowager, please don’t blame me, your servant was using a bad language, I hate him very much. Every day he cursed me ‘little turtle’, he cursed my ancestors; I know he had never said anything true.”

The Empress Dowager coldly said, “I asked you: the things that Hai Tianfu said to me, did you hear it? Don’t babble, give me a straight answer.”

“Your servant was hiding far away outside the gate,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “I did not dare to come near. That evil old fellow’s ears were often very acute, if I came too near, he would hear me. I only saw he talked to the Empress Dowager; I wanted to eavesdrop, but the distance was too far, I couldn’t hear anything. Later, I saw he dared to offend Empress Dowager, he dared to commit treason and heresy, so by risking my life your servant came to help. In the end, whatever he said to Empress Dowager, your servant did not know. He … he must be complaining about your servant, telling the Empress Dowager that I poisoned his eyes blind; although it was the truth, whatever else he said, the Empress Dowager must never

believe. I suppose it was because the Empress Dowager did not believe him that that servant dared to offend the Empress Dowager.”

“Humph!” the Empress Dowager said, “You are very smart, very perceptive. It’s good if you really did not hear whatever Hai Tianfu was saying. It’s also good if you pretend you did not hear it. If in the future even half a word of baseless rumor ever reaches my ear, you know what will happen to you.”

“Empress Dowager’s kindness to your servant is as heavy as the mountain,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “If any brazen scoundrel ever dares to say any unpleasant talk behind the Empress Dowager and His Majesty’s back, your servant will stake my life to fight him.”

“I like it if you can be like this,” the Empress Dowager said, “Previously I haven’t treated you that good.”

“Previously His Majesty and your servant wrestled and practiced martial art together,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Your servant did not know it was the Lord of Ten Thousand Years, my talk and actions were random and wild, but Empress Dowager and His Majesty did not hold it against me the least bit, it was truly a kindness as heavy as the mountain. Otherwise, even if your servant had a hundred heads, all of them deserved to be chopped. Every day that evil old fellow wanted to kill your servant, fortunately Empress Dowager has saved my life. Your servant is truly extremely grateful.”

The Empress Dowager slowly said, “You know gratitude, that’s very good. Light that candle on the table.”

“Yes!” Wei Xiaobao replied. He struck the flint and lighted the

candle. The candle in the Empress Dowager's room was very thick and unusually bright.

"Come here," the Empress Dowager said, "Let me look at you."

"Yes!" Wei Xiaobao replied. Slowly he walked toward the Empress Dowager's bed. He saw her countenance was snowy white, without the least bit trace of blood. Her eyebrows slightly slanted upward, her eyes were gleaming, Wei Xiaobao's heartbeat quickened; he thought, "She … is she going to kill me to close my mouth? If I move my legs and dash out, I am sure she won't be able to catch up, but if she managed to catch me, that would be the end of me!"

His heart was telling him to immediately rush outside, but his mind was momentarily undecided. In this slight hesitation, the Empress Dowager had already stretched out her left had to grab Wei Xiaobao's right hand. Wei Xiaobao was shocked, his body shook. "Ah!" he gasped.

"What are you afraid of?" the Empress Dowager asked.

"I … I am not afraid, it's just that … it's just that …" Wei Xiaobao stammered.

"It's just that what?" the Empress Dowager asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Empress Dowager's kindness to your servant is as heavy as the mountain, your servant have received something and afraid of something?" He had heard people mentioned the expression 'overwhelmed by favor (usually from superior)', but somehow he could only remember two out of four characters[75].

The Empress Dowager did not understand what he was saying, she asked, "Why are you trembling all over?"

"I ... I am not ... am not ..." Wei Xiaobao replied.

If the Empress Dowager strike him dead with her palm right now, she would not have to worry he would reveal her secret in the future, but however hard she tried, her *chi* simply refused to rise; in reality, her muscles were weary and her strength depleted, although she succeeded in grabbing Wei Xiaobao's hand, she did not have the least bit of strength in her fingers. If Wei Xiaobao were to struggle a little bit, he would have been able to free himself. Thereupon she smiled and said, "You have rendered a great service tonight, I will reward you handsomely."

"It was that evil old fellow who wanted to kill your servant," Wei Xiaobao said, "Luckily Empress Dowager came to rescue me, your servant did not have the least bit of merit."

"You know good from bad," the Empress Dowager said, "In the future I won't treat you unfairly. You may go!" She gently let his hand go.

Wei Xiaobao was ecstatic; immediately he dropped on his knees and kowtowed several times before retreating. The Empress Dowager saw the front piece of his jacket was drenched with blood, obviously he had vomited a lot of blood, but when he kowtowed, his movement was still quite agile; she could not help but feeling bewildered.

When he was leaving the room, Wei Xiaobao took a glance toward Rui Chu who was lying on the floor. He noticed that her chest was fluctuating slowly, her breathing was even, as if she was in a very deep sleep. Her countenance was rosy, it did not show anything unusual. He said in his heart, "In a few days I will bring some cake, pastry and fruit for you to eat."

In quick steps he returned to his own room, bolted the door,

and let out a long breath, as if a heavy load had just been released. Recently, staying with Hai Laogong in the same room, he had been very scared and was on the edge all the time. "Now the old turtle is dead," he thought, "I don't have to worry somebody would come to harm me." Suddenly he recalled the Empress Dowager's countenance under the candle light; his body shivered violently. "Living in this Imperial Palace, there is no peace and security, but *laozi* still ... still .. ha ha, still have to get that four hundred fifty thousand *taels* of silver and then return to Yangzhou to see Mama. It will be wonderful." Thinking that he was still alive and had four hundred fifty thousand *taels* of silver lost and won back, he could not help but dancing and gesticulating for joy.

He was having a cheerful mood for a while, gradually he felt weary; he lay down on the bed and fell into a very deep slumber.

Chapter 7

Since ancient times, success or failure always involves several cause, most of the heroes under the heavens know.

(Translated by Foxs)

After taking the medicine, Oboi's sanity failed, he did not know someone was attacking him from behind. As the dagger went deep into his back, Oboi howled wildly, while randomly waving the iron chain on his hands. Outside the window, the men in black were startled and staring blankly for a moment, as if they were

witnessing the most bizarre thing on earth.

When Wei Xiaobao awoke the next day, he felt a dull ache on the pit of his stomach, he also felt his entire body was devoid of any strength. He knew it was because of Hai Laogong's palm strike and kick the previous night. He struggled hard to stand up, and saw the widespread bloodstain on his chest. Thereupon he took off his long gown and soaked it in the water tub. When he rubbed the gown, suddenly he realized that the fabric of the gown was falling apart. Wei Xiaobao was startled. He lifted up the gown from the tub and saw two large holes on the chest of the gown, one was in the shape of a palm, the other was shaped like the sole of a foot. He was greatly amazed, "This … what ghost made these holes?"

Thinking about 'ghost', instantly all the hair on his body stood up. His first thought was, "The old turtle's ghost came back and made these two holes on my gown." And then he thought, "I wonder if the old turtle's ghost is blind, or he can see clearly?" When a blind person dies, will he turn into a blind ghost? This thought flashed through his mind several times, then he decided he did not want to think about it. Raising the gown in front of his face, he was staring blankly for a while before suddenly a realization hit: "It's not a ghost! Last night the old turtle struck me with his palm and kick me with his foot. These two holes are from those strikes. Ha ha … *laozi*'s martial art ability is not bad, I only spit out a couple mouthfuls of blood, it's nothing. Ay, I wonder if I suffer an internal injury? Perhaps there is an internal injury medicine in the old turtle's medicine box, I'd better take some."

Since Hai Laogong had died, naturally Wei Xiaobao did not need to be polite to take over his possessions. Haughtily he imitated Hai Laogong's coughing before opening the medicine chest. The medicine chest was full of bottles and pouches of all shapes and sizes. The bottles and pouches were labeled with

many characters, but he did not recognize a single one; how could he tell which bottle contain poison and which bottle contain medicine? He found a bottle with yellow medicinal powder inside, and got quite a shock, recognizing it as the powder he used to dissolve Xiao Guizi's body the other day, the 'Corpse Transforming Powder'. He only needed to flick a tiny amount of powder onto the wound, and soon afterwards, the body, as well as the clothes, shoes and socks, had turned into a puddle of yellow liquid. Naturally he did not dare to touch this bottle of medicinal powder.

He also recalled how by adding a tiny bit of a medicinal powder he had blinded Hai Laogong's eyes. So in any case he would not dare to take medicine casually. Luckily the pain on his chest was not too bad. He muttered to himself, "Damn it, *laozi* is proficient in martial art; won't it be better if I don't take any medicine?" Immediately he closed the medicine chest and went through the other objects inside the trunk. Most were old clothes, old-looking books and so on. He also found more than two hundred *taels* of silver, but he was not interested in that money at all, not only because Songgotu had already promised him four hundred fifty thousand *taels*, but also because by throwing the dice with Wen Youdao and the others, it would not be too difficult for him to win several hundred *taels.*

He rummaged through Xiao Guizi's trunk, took out a set of long gown and put it on. Seeing the light and soft black vest he was wearing, he was unconsciously startled. "The old turtle made two big holes on my gown, how come this piece of clothing did not show the least bit of damage? This is taken from Oboi's treasure trove, if it were not a treasure, why did Oboi hide it inside the secret treasure trove?" And then he had a second thought, "The old turtle hit me and I am not dead, he kicked me and I did not turn mushy, perhaps it was not because of Wei Xiaobao's proficiency in martial art, but because Oboi's treasured clothes has saved my life. The other day Suo *Dage*

urged me to wear it, he truly has a great foresight. But after putting it on, I never take it off again, my foresight is also not small."

While he was feeling very proud of himself, suddenly from outside came the voice of someone calling out, "Gui Gong-gong, congratulations, congratulations! Open the door, quick!"

Wei Xiaobao opened the door while still buttoning his gown. "What's the happy occasion?" he asked.

There were four eunuchs standing outside the door, they all bowed and paid their respects to Wei Xiaobao. "Congratulations Gui Gong-gong," they said together.

Wei Xiaobao only said, "It's too early in the morning, why are you so polite?"

One of the eunuchs, around forty years old, laughed and said, "Just now the Empress Dowager issued an imperial decree to the Minister of Internal Affair, because Hai Tianfu, Hai Gong-gong died of his illness, Gui Gong-gong is promoted to be the Vice Manager in charge of the Catering Department."

Another eunuch laughed and said, "We did not wait for the Minister of Internal Affair to announce the gracious imperial decree; we rushed at once to come here and congratulate you. From now on Gui Gong-gong is in charge of the entire Catering Department. It's indeed very good!"

Being promoted to a eunuch position, Wei Xiaobao did not think it was anything terrific; he only thought, "The Empress Dowager promotes my rank so that I won't reveal anything about last night's matter. Actually, even though she did not promote me, *laozi* would not dare to speak too much. If my head is moving home, my mouth will follow, how can I talk too much then? But since the Empress Dowager is promoting me, it's unlikely that she is going to kill me; that's a great relief." Thinking about this, he was beaming with joy. He took out some

banknotes and gave each man fifty *taels* for their trouble in bringing the good news.

One of the eunuchs said, “In our Palace, there has never been a Vice Manager as young as Gui Gong-gong. We have fourteen eunuch managers in our Palace, and eight eunuch Vice Managers, top people, smart people, twenty two in total. Originally, not one of those people was under thirty. Gui Gong-gong is promoted today, tomorrow you will sit as equal with Zhang *Zongguan* [lit. Chief Manager], Wang *Zongguan* and the others; it’s really terrific!”

Another eunuch said, “Everybody only knows that Gui Gong-gong has won His Majesty’s favor, who could have thought that the Empress Dowager also regards you highly. I am afraid in less than half a year you will be promoted as a manager. And then you may help the brothers to be promoted to a higher job!”

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and said, “We all are family, good brothers, why say anything about being promoted or not being promoted? It’s because of the Empress Dowager and His Majesty’s grace, what merit do *lao* … *lao* … I, Gui Xiaobao, have?” He nearly blurted out the word *laozi*, but managed to swallow it back with difficulty. “Come, come, come,” he said, “Let’s sit inside and have some tea!”

The middle-aged eunuch said, “Perhaps it will be later this afternoon that the Minister of Internal Affair will announce the Empress Dowager’s gracious decree. Everybody wants to invite Gui Gong-gong for a drink to congratulate Gong-gong’s meteoric rise, being promoted two grades in succession. Gui Gong-gong, now you are a fifth-grade officer; that is really not a small matter.” The other three eunuchs noisily cheering and applauding; they were adamant at pulling Wei Xiaobao along to drink wine. Although recently Wei Xiaobao had grown accustomed to people fawning on him, yet when the flattery

came, he enjoyed listening to it after all. Immediately he locked the door and laughing happily he followed the four eunuchs to have a drink.

Among the four eunuchs, two were the Empress Dowager's personal attendants who had received the order from the Empress Dowager to convey the imperial decree to the Minister of Internal Affair, and thus they were the first to know. The other two were supervisors in the Catering Department; one was in charge of the purchasing of grains, the other was in charge of the purchasing vegetables and meat dishes, two most lucrative positions in the Palace. Very early that day both of them had heard about Hai Tianfu's death; immediately they stood guard outside the Minister of Internal Affair's gate, keeping their eyes and ears open, to find out who would fill Hai Tianfu's vacant position, so that they could quickly make arrangement to preserve their own positions.

The four eunuchs took Wei Xiaobao to a room in the imperial kitchen; they respectfully invited him to sit on the head of the table. The imperial kitchen knew that tomorrow this boy would be their immediate supervisor; therefore, with all their hearts and mind they prepared the best vegetable and meat dishes. Perhaps it was even better than the Empress Dowager and the Emperor's daily meal.

Wei Xiaobao was not used to drinking wine, and thus he talked rubbish freely with them. A court eunuch said with a sigh, "Hai Gong-gong was a good man, too bad his body was always not well, plus he was blind. Although he was in charge of the Catering Department for all these years, he was rarely in the imperial kitchen more than one or two days in a month."

Another eunuch said, "Luckily everybody handles everything with devotion, so that there has never been any significant set-back."

Yet another eunuch said, "Hai Laogong was an old minister

favored by the late emperor. If it were not because of the old master's grace, the Catering Department supervisor position would have been commissioned to someone else early on. Gui Gong-gong is a favorite of His Majesty and the Empress Dowager, so it is entirely a different matter. We may take shelter under the big tree's shade, from now on the way we handle matters will be a lot more convenient."

The previous eunuch said, "I heard Hai Gong-gong died of his coughing yesterday."

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao piped in, "When Hai Gong-gong was coughing, often times he could not breathe easily."

The eunuch who waited on the Empress Dowager said, "At daybreak this morning, the imperial physician, Great Doctor Li, presented a report to the Empress Dowager, saying that the tuberculosis Hai Gong-gong suffered had entered his bones, that the rheumatism had entered his heart; the chronic illness for many years had finally break out, so that it was incurable. Afraid that his tuberculosis might spread out to other people, his body was cremated as soon as it was morning. The Empress Dowager sighed for quite some time; she said repeatedly, 'It's a pity, it's a pity, this man Hai Tianfu was extraordinarily honest!'"

Wei Xiaobao was pleasantly surprised; he knew that the imperial bodyguards, the imperial physician and the court eunuchs, were all afraid of taking responsibility, thereupon the fact that Hai Gong-gong being killed was concealed and was not reported publicly, which exactly suited the Empress Dowager's wishes. Wei Xiaobao mused, "What tuberculosis entered his bones, rheumatism entered his heart? The old turtle had a dagger entered his belly and sharp sword entered his heart is more accurate."

After drinking for a while, the two eunuch supervisors of the Catering Department started to mention that life as court eunuchs was hard, that all they could rely on was to dredge up

some fat or occasional income, that they wished Wei Xiaobao would not be as strict as Hai Laogong, in all matters he should be a little bit more accommodating. Wei Xiaobao understood some, but missed most of what they were saying; he simply said yes and no. After the meal, the two eunuchs stuffed a little envelope inside Wei Xiaobao's pocket, which, upon returning to his room, he opened and looked. Turned out it was two banknotes, each one worth one thousand *taels*. These three characters 'one thousand *taels*' he was able to recognize. He thought, "I haven't taken the office, and have received two thousand up front. The fat and additional income is really not bad!"

By the ninth hour [3 – 5 pm], Kangxi sent someone to summon him to the Upper Study Room. Beaming with smile, Kangxi said, "Xiao Guizi, the Empress Dowager said that last night you rendered another great service, so she wanted me to promote you."

"I already know it!" Wei Xiaobao said in his heart. Immediately he feigned a surprised and delighted exclamation, before kneeling down and kowtowed, saying, "Your servant did not have any meritorious service, it's all due to the Empress Dowager and Your Majesty's graciousness."

Kangxi said, "The Empress Dowager said that last night there were several court eunuchs fighting in the garden, the disturbance startled the Empress Dowager. You happened to pass by and have handled this matter very appropriately. You may be young, but have a mature understanding."

Wei Xiaobao stood up and said, "Mature understanding is not necessarily true. I only know that some things should be remembered well, while other things should be entirely forgotten, and never to be mentioned forever. During the fight, the eunuchs uttered some really unpleasant words to hear, naturally anybody should not mention it too much."

Kangxi nodded; with a faint smile on his face he said, “Xiao Guizi, although you and I are not too old, we can achieve several great accomplishments, don’t let the ministers belittle us by saying we don’t understand anything.”

“Absolutely,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “As long as Your Majesty has a plan in mind, you can leave the execution of it to your servant.”

“Very good!” Kangxi said, “That servant Oboi has started a rebellion and defied his superior. Although I spare him from death, this man’s cronies are numerous; I am afraid that the ashes will burn once more, another rebellion will arise; that will be too far from good.”

“Absolutely!” Wei Xiaobao said.

“I knew it all along that Oboi is unyielding,” Kangxi said, “That’s why I did not send him to Punishment Ministry’s Heavenly Prison to avoid him babbling nonsense, but I have him imprisoned in Prince Kang’s mansion. Just now Prince Kang came and reported that day in day out that servant raises a clamor, shouting impertinent talks.” Speaking to this point, he lowered his voice and said, “That servant says that I used a small dagger and stabbed him on the back.”

“Where did such thing come from?” Wei Xiaobao said, “To deal with this servant, why should Your Majesty personally make his move? It was your servant who stabbed him with a dagger. Let your servant go to Prince Kang to explain.”

If the rumor that Kangxi personally plotting against Oboi had ever spread, Kangxi would lose his dignity as a ruler, which was the reason he was anxious. Hearing Wei Xiaobao’s recommendation, he was delighted. Nodding his head, he said, “You understand this matter very well.” After a slight hesitation he said, “Go to Prince Kang’s residence, see when that servant will die.”

“Yes!” Wei Xiaobao said.

Kangxi said, “I thought he would die as soon as the dagger stabbed him, that’s why I spared his life. I did not anticipate that this servant will be this robust, unexpectedly he is able to survive until now and make irresponsible remarks over there, misleading the minds of the people. If I have known it …” There was a hint of remorse in his voice.

Wei Xiaobao grabbed Kangxi’s intention, he wanted to send him to kill Oboi quietly, thereupon he said, “I think most likely he won’t live pass today.”

Kangxi summoned four imperial guards and ordered them to escort Wei Xiaobao to Prince Kang’s mansion on official business.

Wei Xiaobao returned to his residence first to fetch things that he would need, and then riding a tall and big horse, under the protection of the four imperial bodyguards surrounding him all around, he went to Prince Kang’s mansion. He glanced to the left and right along the way, feeling immensely proud of himself. Suddenly he heard a man on the street said, “I heard that the one who captured that big treacherous minister Oboi was a teenage little gong-gong?”

“That’s right,” another man replied, “His Majesty is a teenager, the gong-gong waiting on him whom he favors are all teenagers.”

The first man said, “Could it be this little gong-gong is the one?”

“I don’t know about that,” the other man replied.

An imperial guard, wanted to curry Wei Xiaobao’s favor, loudly said, “Capturing that treacherous minister Oboi is this Gui Gong-gong’s great merit.”

Oboi loved to kill Han people, he was brutal and greedy for

bribery; all common people hated him to the bone. When he was arrested and his house searched, his possession confiscated, there was thunderous rejoicing inside and outside Beijing city wall. The young emperor issued an imperial decree on the capture of Oboi, and that he boldly resisted arrest, until a bunch of little eunuchs knocked him down. This matter had also spread out that everybody within the city knew about it. The common people added fuel and spices, drawing mental pictures and sounds; in the teahouses around town, the guests talked about it with splattered saliva, how Oboi attacked the Emperor with a flying kick, how each one of the little eunuchs was proficient in martial art, how using the style 'Dry Vine Coiling the Root' they threw down Oboi, how Oboi leaped back up using 'Flipping Carp' style, how the little eunuch used 'Black Tiger Snatching the Heart'; each move and each style was described so vividly as if everybody had witnessed it with their own eyes.

In the last few days, whenever a eunuch went to the market, instantly people would crowd around him, asking about the story of Oboi's arrest. And now they heard the imperial guard announcing that this little eunuch was the minister who had given the outstanding service in Oboi's capture, the market street was abuzz with sensation, countless common people applauded and cheered. In all his life Wei Xiaobao had never received such honor, he could not restrain his heart from blooming with pride, he really felt like a real hero. It was only the two imperial bodyguards wielding their sabers at the front to open the way, and thus creating fear to some extent, that stopped the crowd of curious onlookers from surrounding Wei Xiaobao to get a closer look and asked endless questions.

The five of them arrived at Prince Kang's mansion. Hearing the Emperor sending a personal envoy, Prince Kang busily opened the center gate and went out to welcome them. He arranged a table with burning incense in preparation to receive

the imperial edict.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "*Wangye*, His Majesty sends *Xiaoren* to check on Oboi, there is no other important matter."

"Yes, yes!" Prince Kang replied. He had seen Wei Xiaobao standing by Kangxi's side in the Upper Study Room, he also knew that Wei Xiaobao had rendered a great service in the capture of Oboi. With a happy laugh he held Wei Xiaobao's hand and said, "Gui Gong-gong, you seldom honor us with your presence, let us drink a couple up cups first before going to see that servant Oboi." Immediately he ordered a banquet to be prepared. The four imperial bodyguards were to have another banquet, accompanied by the military officers of the Prince's mansion. Prince Kang took Wei Xiaobao to the flower garden where they sat face to face and drank wine. He asked Wei Xiaobao what his indulgence was.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "If I say I like gambling, the Prince might accompany me throwing the dice, and he would definitely lose to me on purpose. Winning his money is called victory without real skill." Thereupon he said, "I don't like anything in particular."

Prince Kang pondered, "Old people like money, middle-aged and young people like women, but it's improbable that eunuchs will like women. I wonder what will this little eunuch like? It's hard to guess. This child knows martial art, perhaps he would like a treasured saber or a treasured sword, but then he might stir up a disaster in the Palace, then I will have to take the responsibility. Ah, I know!" He laughed and said, "Gui Gong-gong, when I first met you, I feel like we are old friends. In my stable we raise several good horses. I am inviting you to select several horses. Just consider it as a little give from *Xiao Wang*[76], what do you think?"

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, he said, "How can I dare

to accept *Wangye’*s gift?”

Prince Kang said, “We are brothers, what do you mean by ‘gift'? Come, come, come, let us look at the horses first and then come back to drink wine.” Pulling Wei Xiaobao’s hand, he led him to the stable.

Prince Kang ordered the groom to lead out several of his best ponies. Wei Xiaobao was disappointed inwardly, “Why ask me to choose a pony?” he thought, “Do you think I am a little child who only rides on a pony?” Seeing the groom had led five, six different ponies, he laughed and said, “*Wangye*, my stature is not tall, I'd love to ride a big horse, so I won't look too short and small."

Prince Kang immediately understood; slapping his thigh he laughed and said, "I am muddle-headed, I am muddle-headed." He ordered the groom, "Take Jade Flower, my buckskin horse, out, let Gui Gong-gong take a look at it."

The groom went into the stable, and returned with a tall and big horse, its entire body was white, dappled with red spots. It raised its head high and tossed its mane, it was truly an extraordinary divine steed. It has gold bridle and gold stirrup, the edge of the saddle was inlaid with silver and precious stones. Just the accessories on the horse alone worth nobody knows how much money; if not princes and dukes or royalty, or perhaps high-ranking official or rich merchant, nobody would dare to use this kind of luxurious saddle and accessories. Wei Xiaobao did not understand anything about quality of horses; seeing this horse's handsome appearance, he could not help but cheering, "What a beautiful horse!"

Prince Kang laughed and said, "This horse was delivered from the Western Region, a famous Ferghana horse. Don't look at its big and tall body, this horse is still very young, only a few months over two years. A beautiful horse deserves to be ridden by beautiful rider. Gui *Xiongdi*, how about you pick this Jade

Flower buckskin horse?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "This ... this is the horse *Wangye* rides, how can *Xiaoren* dare to desire it? I will be happy to accept any other of *Wangye*'s horse."

"Gui *Xiongdi*," Prince Kang said, "You consider me as an outsider like this, aren't looking down too much on *Xiongdi*? Could it be that you are unwilling to have me as a friend?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Ay, in the Palace *Xiaoren* is only a ... a lowly person, how can I dare to make friends with *Wangye*?"

Prince Kang said, "We, Manchu people, are frank and straightforward. If you consider me as your friend, then you'll take this horse; afterwards, there won't be any distinction between what's mine and what's yours. Otherwise, in my heart, *Xiongdi* will be greatly offended!" Saying that, his beard rose on its end, he put on an appearance as if he was panting with rage.

Wei Xiaobao was ecstatic; he said, "*Wangye*, you ... you treat the lowly one so good, I really don't know how to repay?"

"What are you talking about? Repay or not repay," Prince Kang said, "You are willing to take this horse, it can be considered you are giving me a face." Walking toward the horse's rear, he gently slapped the horse's butt several times and said, "Jade Flower, Jade Flower, from now on you'll follow this Gong-gong, be a good horse." Toward Wei Xiaobao he said, "*Xiongdi*, why don't you try?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed, "Yes!" he replied. Slapping his hand on the saddle, he leaped up and sat on the horseback. For the last several months he had been practicing martial art, in term of punching and kicking he might not learn too much, but jumping and leaping, his movement was vigorous and nimble.

"Good skill!" Prince Kang cheered.

The groom let the reins go, the Jade Flower buckskin horse trotted around the sandy ground outside the stable. Riding on the horseback, Wei Xiaobao felt the speed, as well as the steadiness of the horse. He did not have the slightest knowledge of any technique to control the horse, afraid that he might make a fool of himself, after trotting several rounds he leaped down from the horseback. The horse stopped and stood still on its own accord.

"*Wangye*," Wei Xiaobao said, "Thank you very much for your generous gift! *Xiaoren* is going to see Oboi now, I'll come back later to accompany you."

"Certainly," Prince Kang replied, "This is the important mission on which you are being sent. *Xiao Xiongdi*, please report to His Majesty that we guard him very strictly, even if this servant grew wings, he would not be able to escape."

"That's for sure," Wei Xiaobao said.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Prince Kang asked.

"I do not dare to brother *Wangye*'s honorable self," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Every time Prince Kang see Oboi, he was always shouted at, cursed and berated by Oboi, so he did not really want to see him. Thereupon he sent eight guards to escort Wei Xiaobao to inspect the offender.

The eight guards led Wei Xiaobao toward the rear garden, to the front of an isolated stone building. Outside the building there were sixteen guards with steel sabers in their hands; on top of that, there were two chief guards continuously going on a patrol around the building. The guarding of the prisoner was indeed very strict. As soon as the chiefs found out that the Emperor had sent a personal envoy to inspect, they led the guards to bow and salute. They opened the big lock on the iron gate, pushed open the iron gate, and invited Wei Xiaobao to

enter.

The stone building was really dark inside, on the corridor there was a kitchen stove leaning against the wall, an old servant was cooking rice. The chief of the guards said, "Normally this iron door will not be opened easily, the prisoner's food and drink is prepared in here by this man, and then delivered into the prison cell."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "Very good!" he said, "Your *Wangye* had given it a thorough thought. The iron door is not opened, it will be very difficult for the prisoner to escape."

The chief of the guards said, "*Wangye*'s order: if the prisoner is trying to escape, he is to be killed without question." The chief of the guards led Wei Xiaobao to enter through a small hall, and immediately they could hear Oboi's voice coming from inside, cursing the Emperor: "Your granny, from the cradle to the grave *laozi* has established countless heroic contribution, so that your grandfather, your father can occupy this beautiful rivers and mountains. You, little demon with no prospect, are but a child, yet you don't know kindness when you see one, you stab me in the back with a dagger, you plotted against *laozi*. Even if *laozi* becomes a malicious spirit, I will not spare you."

The chief of the guards frowned and said, "This servant's mouth is undisciplined and out of control, he really deserved to be beheaded."

Following Oboi's voice, Wei Xiaobao came to an iron window of a small room. He craned his neck to look inside, and saw Oboi, with disheveled hair, with shackles and fetters on his hands and feet, was walking back and forth in the room. He dragged the shackles on the floor, creating a clanking noise. Oboi saw Wei Xiaobao and shouted, "You ... you ... you deserve to die ten thousand times, pen1sless[77] little demon, come in, come in,

let *laozi* pinch your throat!" His eyes bulging, his gaze fiery, suddenly he ran toward Wei Xiaobao. 'Bang!' his body heavily struck the wall. Although he knew that the wall was very thick, still, Wei Xiaobao was shocked and withdrew two steps back. Seeing Oboi's mean and ferocious appearance he could not help but was extremely scared.

"Gong-gong," the chief of the guards comforted him, "Don't be afraid, this servant won't come out."

Wei Xiaobao calmed down. He saw that the iron bars on that iron window were very thick, the stone wall was also very thick, plus the shackles and fetters on Oboi's hands and feet were very heavy. His spirit involuntarily rose up. "Why should I fear of him?" he said, "All of you may wait for me outside. His Majesty ordered me to ask him several questions." The guards complied and withdrew. Oboi was still cursing angrily.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Ao *Shaobao*, His Majesty sent me here to see if you, Senior, are well. You are cursing people, that means your spirit is 100% alive and well, your body is very healthy; when His Majesty learns about it, he will be very happy."

Oboi raised his hands and struck his chains against the iron window, 'dang, dang!', while roaring angrily, "Your granny, you little b@stard raised by a b1tch. Tell your Emperor, I don't need his hypocrisy, if he wanted to kill me just kill, do you think Oboi will be scared?"

The thick iron frame of the window was shaking from his strike, Wei Xiaobao was afraid Oboi might break the window and come out, he took another step back. He said with a laugh, "It won't be that easy for His Majesty to kill you. He wanted you to stay here peacefully for twenty, thirty years. When you feel real remorse in your heart, you may crawl out and kowtow several hundred times to His Majesty, remembering your past merit, His Majesty may forgive you and let you out. But you

won't be back to your high-ranking post."

Oboi roared, "Tell him not to have a big dream in a clear autumn day; if he wants to kill Oboi, that is very easy, but he wants Oboi to kowtow to him, that is a thousand times, ten thousand times more difficult."

"We'll wait and see," Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "After three or five years, when His Majesty suddenly remembers you, he may send me back to see you. Ao *Shaobao Daren*, please take a good care of yourself, you must never catch cold or cough, headache or stomachache."

Oboi cursed, "Ache your mother's b@stard lamb. The young emperor was fine, it was you, raised by b1tch Han people who taught him bad things. If the old Emperor would listen to me early on, not a single one of Han official would be needed in the imperial court, not a single one of Han dog would be allowed to enter the Palace, otherwise, do you think it will be a mess such as today?"

Wei Xiaobao ignored him completely, he withdrew toward the servant who was cooking by the kitchen stove. Seeing steam was rising from the pot, he lifted the lid to look in, and saw it was a pork and white cabbage soup. "Smells good," he said.

"It's for the prisoner," the old servant said, "Nothing good in it."

Wei Xiaobao said, "His Majesty ordered me to personally inspect the prisoner's food and drink, we must not let him starve."

The old servant said, "Gong-gong please don't worry, he won't starve. "*Wangye* has ordered that every day we must give him a catty of meat."

"Scoop a bowl and let me have a taste," Wei Xiaobao said, "If you mistreat the prisoner, I will ask *Wangye* to beat you with a board."

The old servant was terrified; "Yes, yes!" he said, "*Xiaoren* does not dare to mistreat the prisoner." Busily he fetch a bowl and scooped a ladleful or pork and cabbage, which he respectfully handed over to Wei Xiaobao with both hands; he also presented a pair of chopsticks.

Wei Xiaobao received the bowl and drank a mouthful of soup; he showed neither approval nor disapproval. Looking at the chopsticks he said, "These chopsticks are too dirty, clean it well for me."

"Yes, yes!" the old servant busily replied. Taking the chopsticks, he went out to the courtyard, where a water jar was standing, and wipe and wash the chopsticks well.

Wei Xiaobao turned his body around and took a package of medicinal powder from his pocket, which he poured into that large bowl of pork and cabbage, and then he put the paper wrapper back into his pocket. He shook the bowl several times to dissolve the medicinal powder into the soup. He knew that Kangxi wanted to kill Oboi, but it must be done without leaving any trace. Walking out of the Upper Study Room, he got an idea, thereupon he returned to his residence and took out about a dozen kinds of medicinal powder from Hai Laogong's medicinal chest. Without any care whether it was poison or not, he mixed them all randomly, and then wrapped it all in a sheet of paper. His thought was that among those dozen different powders, there must be two or three poison, so if he let Oboi have it, his chance of survival would be very slim.

Finished cleaning up the chopsticks, the old servant respectfully handed it over to Wei Xiaobao. Wei Xiaobao took the chopsticks and used it to stir Oboi's bowl of pork; he said, "Um, there are a lot of pork in here. Do you usually give him this much meat? I'll say most likely you steal some for yourself!"

"Each meal has this much meat," the old servant said,

"*Xiaoren* does not dare to steal food." While in his heart he was astonished, "How did this little Gong-gong know that I steal the prisoner's food? That's a bit strange!"

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "You may deliver the food to the prisoner."

"Yes, yes!" the old servant replied. He fixed three large bowls of white rice, and then along with the large bowl of pork and cabbage, he placed the bowls on a tray and deliver it to Oboi.

Wei Xiaobao lifted his chopsticks to gently tapping the edge of the pot; in his heart, he was very proud of himself, thinking, "If that servant Oboi eats the bowl of pork and cabbage that I fixed, if blood does not flow out of his seven orifices, then ... then blood will flow from his eight orifices and he'll die." He only knew there was a phrase 'blood flowing from seven orifices', but in all honesty his knowledge was very limited; not knowing any better, he added one more to the phrase 'seven orifices'.

Putting down the bowl and the chopsticks, he strolled outside to chat with the guards on duty. After a while he thought that by this time Oboi most like would have had eaten the bowl of pork clean; thereupon he said to the chief of the guards, "Let's go back in to take a look!"

"Yes!" the chief of the guards replied.

The two of them had just entered the door when suddenly they heard two of the guards outside were shouting almost simultaneously, "Who's there? Stop!" Followed by 'swish, swish!' the sound of arrows being shot. The chief of the guards was startled and busily said, "Gong-gong, I am going out to look." And he ran outside.

Wei Xiaobao followed behind him; he heard clashing noise as about a dozen men in black, with naked blades in their hands, were fighting with the guards. Wei Xiaobao was greatly shocked, "Aiyo!" he exclaimed, "Oboi's men are here to rescue

him."

The chief of the guards drew his sword and led the fight. He only shouted a few words when a man and a woman attacked him from left and right. The four imperial guards escorting Wei Xiaobao were not too far at the front of the building. Hearing the noise, they rushed in to join the fight.

The man in black's martial art was quite strong, in an instant two mansion guards were already lying on the ground, dead. Wei Xiaobao withdrew back inside the stone building and hastily closed the door. He was about to bolt the door when a group of men dashed in, throwing him several *zhang* back. Four men in black had broken into the stone building. "Where is Oboi? Where is Oboi?" they shouted. An old man with long beard grabbed Wei Xiaobao and asked, "Where is Oboi?"

Wei Xiaobao pointed outside and said, "He is imprisoned in the dungeon outside." Two of the men in black immediately rushed out. Another group of four men in black rushed in and swiftly ran toward the rear courtyard. Suddenly someone shouted, "In here!" The old man with long beard was angry; he raised his saber to chop Wei Xiaobao. Wei Xiaobao desperately trying to flee. Another man in black from the side kicked him on his butt, sending him flying several *zhang* away and he landed on the rear courtyard.

Six men in black rammed the prison's iron door together, but the iron door was very sturdy, how could they strike it open in such a short period of time? They heard a rapid 'dong, dong, dong' sound of the gong outside, the Prince's mansion had raised the alarm. One of the man in black shouted, "We must hurry!" The long-bearded old man replied, "No kidding! Who does not know we must hurry?"

Seeing their battering failed to open the iron door, a man in black raised the steel whip he had in his hand and used it as a pry bar. After several push, the two iron bars began to open. By

now three more men in black rushed in. The hallway in front of the prison was narrow, nine people crowded together, they could not use their hands and feet freely.

Wei Xiaobao quietly crawled out on the floor, but before he went too far, the men spotted him. Someone stabbed a sword to his back. Wei Xiaobao dodged to the left. The man swept his sword sideways. 'Swish!' it made a big rip on the back of his long gown. Luckily Wei Xiaobao was protected by his treasured vest so that the sword did not harm his skin and flesh. In his fright and panic he leaped up and rushed toward the crowd.

Another man in black cursed, "Little demon!" He raised his saber and hacked it down. Wei Xiaobao jumped up suddenly and caught the iron bars on the prison's window, his body was hanging in the air. The man in black wielding the steel whip was in the process of prying the iron bars open, seeing Wei Xiaobao was obstructing him at the door, he struck his whip down. Wei Xiaobao was caught in a dead end, plus his legs were caught in between the two iron bars. The iron bars was already bent, his body was slim and small, unexpectedly he was able to slip through the gap. Releasing his grip, he fell down into the prison cell. 'Dang!' the steel whip struck the iron bars.

The men in black outside shouted one after another, "I'm going in, I'm going in." The man with the steel whip probed his head into the opening trying to worm his way in. A thirteen, fourteen years old Wei Xiaobao could slip in, but this man's stature was stout and strong, how could he slip through?

Wei Xiaobao drew the dagger from his boot while shouting inwardly, "I wish the help will come soon, I wish the help will come soon!" He heard the sound of copper gong outside, he heard the shouts and the clashing of weapons. Suddenly 'whoosh!' a gust of wind pressed down on his head. Wei Xiaobao rolled several *chi* away; he heard a loud clanking noise, followed by a searing pain on his face as some sand splashed

onto him. Without looking back he hastily jumped away. He saw Oboi was waving his iron chain, "Heh, heh," he shouted, while jumping and leaping madly. At this moment, the man in black wielding the steel whip had just put his head through the window frame. Oboi ferociously swung his shackles onto his head. His brain dashed out, the man in black died instantly.

Wei Xiaobao was surprised to no end, "Why did he kill the people who want to rescue him?" But then he realized immediately, "Aiyo! After eating the medicinal powder I fed him, although he is poisoned, he did not immediately go to see Emperor Yan Luo[78], but went mad instead!"

Outside the door, the men were shouting and yelling. Oboi raised his shackled hands and fiercely attacked the prison door. Wei Xiaobao thought, "If he turns around and hit me, *laozi* will definitely return to heaven!" In this desperate situation, almost without thinking he pounced forward and with all his might he thrust his dagger into Oboi's back.

After taking the medicine, Oboi's sanity failed; in his confused mind, he did not know someone was attacking him from behind. As Wei Xiaobao's dagger was coming at him, he did not even try to evade, 'stab!' it went deep into his back. Oboi howled wildly, while randomly waving the iron chain on his hands. Wei Xiaobao seized this opportunity to drag the dagger downward. The dagger could cut iron like mud, it sliced from top to bottom, Oboi's back was cut in two, and he fell down immediately.

Outside the window, the men in black were startled and staring blankly for a moment, as if they were witnessing the most bizarre thing on earth. About three, four men cried out almost simultaneously, "This kid killed Oboi! This kid killed Oboi!"

The long-bearded old man said, "Pry open the iron window, get in and make sure it is really Oboi!" Two men immediately

picked the steel whip to forcefully pry the iron bars open. Two of the guards from the Prince's mansion broke into the room, the long-bearded old man brandished his scimitar and chopped them dead one by one. A man in black used a short spear to poke repeatedly toward Wei Xiaobao across the window, to prevent him from coming near and injure somebody. Not too long afterwards, the gap between the iron bars had grown big enough; a thin man in black said, "Let me come in!" And he jumped into the prison cell trough the window.

Wei Xiaobao raised his dagger and stabbed it to him. The thin man used his saber to block. 'Tchak!' the saber broke into two. The thin man was startled, he threw the broken saber in his hand toward Wei Xiaobao. Wei Xiaobao lower his head to dodge, but both of his hands were grabbed by that thin man, and were twisted behind his back. Another man in black placed a saber on his neck and shouted, "Don't move!"

Two more of the iron bars on the window were taken down, the long-bearded old man and a bald man in black entered the prison cell. They grabbed Oboi's head by his pigtail and lifted it up to take a look. "It is Oboi!" they said together.

The long-bearded old man wanted to shove Oboi's body through the window, but the shackles and fetters were firmly fastened onto the stone walls, and he was unable to break the chain. The thin man picked up Wei Xiaobao's dagger and 'tchak, tchak' four times, he cut the iron chain on Oboi's body. "Good blade!" the long-bearded old man praised. He shoved Oboi's body through the window, and the men in black outside pulled the body out. The thin man also shoved Wei Xiaobao outside the window, and then the three of them slipped out of the prison cell.

The long-bearded old man gave his order, "Take this boy away! Everybody, let's go!" They all shouted their response and rushed outside. A big man in black carried Wei Xiaobao under

his arm as they rushed out of the stone building.

Suddenly ‘swish, swish, swish!’ like flying locusts arrows were shot at them. Twenty-something guards from the Prince’s mansion continuously release the arrows. Wielding a saber, Prince Kang himself led the attack.

Stopped by the arrows, the men in black were unable to dash out. The one carrying Oboi’s body was a Taoist priest. “Follow me!” he called out, as he lifted Oboi’s body as a shield in front of him.

Prince Kang saw Oboi, but he did not know that Oboi had already died. He also saw Wei Xiaobao being carried by one of the assassins. “Stop the arrows!” he yelled, “Don’t harm Gui Gong-gong!” Wei Xiaobao mused, “Prince Kang has a good conscience, *laozi* will always remember your kindness!”

The Prince’s mansion’s archers immediately halted their arrows. Those men in black cried out loudly and dashed out of the stone building. The long-bearded old man waved his hand, four men rushed toward Prince Kang. The guards were shocked; abandoning the enemy, they rushed to save their master. Who would have thought that it was actually that long-bearded old man’s ‘making sound in the east and striking to the west’ tactic? The remaining men in black seized this opportunity to jump over the surrounding wall to escape from the Prince’s mansion.

The four men attacking Prince Kang possessed very good *qinggong*, avoiding contact with the guards, they flew to the east and leaped to the west, as if they were waiting for an opportunity to take Prince Kang’s life. However, as soon as their companions were out of the Prince’s mansion, the four of them let out several whistle and jumped over the wall, while repeatedly waved their hands. A dozen or so secret projectiles were shot toward Prince Kang. The guards repeatedly cried out in alarm as they waved their weapons to knock down the secret

projectiles. Still, one steel dart hit Prince Kang’s left arm. Amidst the confusion, the four men in black disappeared from the Prince’s mansion.

Wei Xiaobao was carried by a big man under his arm, as they were speeding down the street. He heard thunderous noise of hoof beats and somebody shouted, “Assassins in Prince Kang's mansion!" It was a large group of reinforcement troops.

The men in black dashed into a commoner's house by the Prince's mansion. They bolted the door and dashed out via the back door. Evidently these people had already prepared their escape route well, they seemed to be familiar with the terrain of that place. Rushing through a small alley, they entered another house, and dashed out via the back door again. After several twist and turn, they entered a large house. All of them quickly shed their black attire and quickly wore other set of clothes. In an instant they all changed into peasants: one carried firewood on shoulder pole, another carried baskets of vegetables, et cetera. The man carrying Wei Xiaobao bound him firmly with hemp rope. Two men pushed a wooden cart, on which were two large wooden barrels. They shoved Oboi's body and Wei Xiaobao into those barrels.

"Damn it!" Wei Xiaobao cursed in his heart. Countless jujubes were poured on top of his head, until he was completely covered with jujubes, then they put the lid down. If someone were to open the lid, all he could see would be jujubes. Then Wei Xiaobao felt his body was swaying, presumably the cart was being pushed out of the door. Although there were gaps in between the jujubes that he was not suffocated, yet he could not breathe freely. From a state of panic, Wei Xiaobao slowly calmed down; he thought, "These people are Oboi's subordinates, most probably they kidnapped *laozi* away because they want to dig out *laozi*'s heart and liver to be sacrificed to Oboi. It would be best if along the way we came across a troop

of soldiers, *laozi* will roll as hard as I can to overturn this wooden barrel, then their secret would be revealed." However, his hands and feet were tightly bound, he could not even move a single strand of his hair.

He could hear the faint rattling of the wheel outside the wooden barrel, while his body was jolted continuously. After traveling for a long time, they did not come across any group of soldiers. Wei Xiaobao cursed for a while, then he was afraid for a while. All of a sudden he opened his mouth and bite a jujube, it was a plump and sweet jujube, so he ate several more. Scared and extremely tired, not too long afterward he unexpectedly fell into a deep sleep.

When he awoke, the cart was still moving. He felt his entire body was sore, he wanted to turn around, but could not move even for half a *fen*. He thought, "This time *laozi* is not going to escape the disaster. As soon as I can, I am going to rain curses on them, to vent the resentment in my heart. In twenty years, I will be considered a hero." His mind went further, "Luckily I have killed Oboi, otherwise, if that servant was rescued by this bunch of dog thieves while *laozi* is in their hands, it would be difficult for me to stay alive, while I can't ask for death either. Oboi was a high-ranking official of the imperial court, Wei Xiaobao is only a little demon from the Lovely Spring Courtyard. A life for a life, Oboi's life is really cheap, ha ha ... really cheap!" Since he was unable to escape, he tried to amuse himself to relieve his anxiety, yet in spite of laughing inwardly, there was not the least bit of cheerful mood in his heart.

A moment later, he fell asleep again. This time he was asleep for a long time. When he woke up, he felt that the cart was rolling smoothly on flat road. A little while later, the cart stopped, but nobody got him out, he was left alone inside the jujube barrel. After more than half a day, Wei Xiaobao felt very stuffy; he was about to fall asleep again when suddenly he

heard creaking noise, the lid was opened, somebody was scooping the jujubes above his head. Wei Xiaobao took a deep breath and was feeling very relieved. Opening his eyes, all he could see was darkness, with a glimmer of light overhead. Someone scooped him out with both hands and carried him horizontally across his arms. Another man was standing by his side, holding a lantern. Turned out it was already night.

The man carrying Wei Xiaobao was an old man with a serene expression. Wei Xiaobao noticed that they were in an enormous courtyard. The old man carried Wei Xiaobao to the rear hall, the man carrying the lantern pushed open a long shutter. Wei Xiaobao cried out inwardly, "I am doomed!" Not knowing which way was up and which way was down, all he could see was an enormous hall, with people standing wall to wall; by his estimation, there were at least two hundred of them. Those people wore black clothing with white bands around their heads and white cloth belt around their waists, all wore mourning attire while their faces showed grief and indignation.

A mourning shrine was set up in the middle of the hall, on the table eight extremely thick blue candles were lighted. Next to the shrine hang several plain white cloths with lamentation couplets written on them, and a vertical 'beckoning the soul' banner. Back in Yangzhou, whenever there was a rich family having a funeral, Wei Xiaobao always joined the fun. He would ask for money, or when everybody was busy and nobody was watching, he would 'lead away a passing goat' by stealing some household item and hiding it in his bosom, he would then sell it in the market and use the money to gamble. Therefore, he was accustomed to see funeral hall arrangement; as soon as he saw it, he knew what it was.

While he was still inside the jujube barrel, he had anticipated that they would cut open his heart and split his chest to be sacrificed to Oboi, but now that the time had already come, he

was so scared that his entire body went limp and his teeth chattered, making a clacking noise. The old man set him down, with his left hand grabbing Wei Xiaobao's shoulder, his right hand severing the hemp rope binding Wei Xiaobao's hands and feet. Wei Xiaobao's limbs were numb, he was unable to stand up. The old man put his hand underneath Wei Xiaobao's right armpit to support him.

It was obvious to Wei Xiaobao that everybody in that hall knew martial art, perhaps he was not a match for any of them, so escaping would be extremely difficult indeed. But if left and right was death, and luckily the rope binding him was severed, he might as well try. The worst that could happen to him was he failed, he got caught back, and they still would have cut open his heart and split his chest. Could they cut more than once, or split him again? The most important things: first, he needed to get the old man's hand off his armpit, so that when he made his move he would not get grabbed, second, he had to try to extinguish the lantern; he would have had greater chance of success in the dark.

Stealing a glance to the people in the hall, he saw there was either a saber hanging on their waist, or a sword sticking out on their back. A middle-aged man walked over to the spirit tablet and said, "Today the big enmity is avenged, *Da … Dage* may close your … your eyes." Before even finished, he voice broke into silent sobs. He turned around and threw himself in front of the spirit tablet and cried loudly. Everybody in the hall followed by wailing loudly.

"Hot piece mama," Wei Xiaobao mused, "*Laozi* will curse now." But immediately changed his mind, "As soon as I open my mouth to curse, these turtle bastards will start attacking *laozi*, then I won't be able to escape." Casting a sideways glance, he saw the old man holding him was using his sleeve to wipe his tears, so he was thinking of turning around and run right then,

but the space behind them was full of people, as soon as he took a single step, they would immediately capture him. He thought that the timing had not come, he must not be reckless.

From among the crowd an old sounding voice shouted, “Offer the sacrifice!” An imposing looking man, bare-chested, with a white cloth band around his head, walked to the front in big strides; he had a wooden tray in his hand, which he lifted high above his head. The tray was covered in thin cloth, on the cloth lay a badly mangled human head. Wei Xiaobao almost fainted; “Hot piece mama,” he thought, “These b@stards are going to cut *laozi*’s head.” He further thought, “Whose head is it? Is it Prince Kang? Or Songgotu? It couldn’t be the Young Emperor, could it?” The wooden tray was lifted very high that Wei Xiaobao was not able to see clearly the severed head’s appearance.

The man set the wooden tray on the sacrifice table and then prostrated himself on the floor. The weeping sound rose again in the hall. “Damn it,” Wei Xiaobao thought, “If I don’t run now, what am I waiting for?” He turned around, wishing to run, but the old man pulled his sleeve, his legs gave up and he fell down, kneeling on the ground. Seeing everybody else was kowtowing, without any choice he also kowtowed, but in his heart he cursed, “Thief Oboi, Turtle Oboi. *Laozi* stabbed you dead with a knife, to the nether world, *laozi* will stab you several more times!”

Finished kowtowing some people stood up, while others lay prostrate and cried loudly. Wei Xiaobao thought, “Real men crying like that, aren’t they ashamed? What good was that bastard Oboi anyway? What’s the regret in him being dead? Why do you shed so much horse urine like this?”

After crying for a while, a tall and slim old man walked over to the spirit tablet, with a loud and clear voice he said, “Brothers,

our Yin *Xiangzhu*'s[79] enmity has been avenged, that servant Oboi has finally be beheaded. It is truly our *Tian Di Hui*'s Green Wood Hall's greatly happy occasion …"

Hearing the words 'that servant Oboi has finally be beheaded', Wei Xiaobao's ears were buzzing; he was startled but happy, like a lightning a thought flashed in his mind, "They are not Oboi's subordinates, but Oboi's personal enemy?" The next several sentences that that tall and slim old man was saying went into Wei Xiaobao's left ear and out of his right. After quite a while, he calmed down and was slowly able to listen; however, he missed a large chunk of the old man's speech. He heard, "… today we created disturbance at Prince Kang's mansion, killed Oboi, and managed to return safely. The Tatars will undoubtedly be panic-stricken; this is an enormous victory to our Society's anti-Qing, restoring-Ming great undertaking. When the brethrens in the other Halls of our Society find out, they will definitely admire our Green Wood Hall's wisdom, bravery, and resolution in doing this daring deed."

"Exactly, exactly," one after another the men shouted their opinions, "This time our Green Wood Hall has gain a lot of face." "Lotus Flower Hall, Scarlet Fire Hall, they all have always blown their own horns, but this time Green Wood Hall outraced them in accomplishing our leader's order!" "When this matter is spread widely all over the world, perhaps in teahouses everywhere our deeds will be told and sung. When in the future the Tatars are driven back outside the Great Wall, the name *Tian Di Hui*'s Green Wood Hall will be engraved in immortality!" "What do you mean driving the Tatars back outside the Great Wall? We are going to chop all Tatars' head and exterminate them completely; they all will die without any burial site." Everybody had something to say, their spirit rose, the mournful air filling the hall just a moment ago was instantly swept away.

Hearing this, Wei Xiaobao did not have the slightest doubt, he

knew these people were the warriors who fought against the imperial court. Before he met Mao Shiba, in the Yangzhou's neighborhood and marketplace, he often heard people mentioning all kinds of chivalrous deeds the *Tian Di Hui* was doing to fight the Qing. In those years, when the Qing troops entered Yangzhou, they massacred the people without restraint, raping and pillaging, committing any imaginable misdeed. The so-called 'Ten days in Yangzhou, Three massacres in Jiading [district, northwest Shanghai]' was really tragic beyond words." In the city of Yangzhou, there was no family whose member did not run into misfortune during this holocaust. As a result, in regard to the sentiment of resisting the Qing, the admiration of people of Yangzhou was virtually several notches higher than that of people of different places.

By this time, the 'Ten days in Yangzhou' disaster happened no more than twenty years ago; since his childhood, Wei Xiaobao had heard people unceasingly mentioned the evil deeds of the Qing army, he also heard about how Shi Gebu sacrificed himself in resisting the enemy, how certain people were able to take the enemy down with their deaths. When Mao Shiba was fighting the salt smugglers at the Lovely Spring Courtyard, it was exactly for the sake of a *Tian Di Hui* member. Along the way, he heard not a few of Mao Shiba's story about *Tian Di Hui*'s heroic deeds, also about the saying 'Whoever never knew Chen Jinnan, he calls himself a hero in vain', and so on. In his heart, Wei Xiaobao had already admired and looked up to these people. At this moment, with his own eyes he had witnessed how this heroic group had killed the Tatars, he could not help but was very excited; in that instant he had forgotten his own status as 'little eunuch' of the Tatars' imperial court.

The tall and slim old man waited until the people were calming down before continuing, "In Green Wood Hall, for the last two years, we have always remembered Yin *Xiangzhu*, Yin *Dage*'s enmity. In front of the spirit tablet of Wan Yunlong *Dage*,

everybody made a blood oath that we were going to kill Oboi to avenge Yin *Dage*. At that time Yin *Xiangzhu* has died as a martyr, everybody in Jianghu admires and respects him. When his soul in heaven sees Oboi, this dog's head, he certainly will have a good laugh."

"Exactly, exactly," the people responded.

A majestic voice from the crowd said, "Two years ago, we all took an oath, if we fail to kill Oboi, then everybody in out Green Wood Hall is the distant grandson of a black bear [i.e. a coward], who won't have any face to walk in the Jianghu. At long last today we wipe away this extraordinary shame and humiliation. For the last two years, I, the one surnamed Fan, cannot eat to the full, cannot have a good sleep; day and night I kept thinking of how can I avenge Yin *Xiangzhu*, how to expunge the disgrace of Green Wood Hall. Finally, everybody's cherished desire is fulfilled. Ha ha, ha ha …!" Many people were laughing wildly with him.

"Alright," the tall and slim old man said, "Our Green Wood Hall has again roused our powerful wind, everybody feels proud and elated, once again we can raise our heads high and behave with integrity. These past two years, the brethrens of Green Wood Hall were like master-less lonely souls, in the *Tian Di Hui*'s meeting, the brethrens of the other halls only had to look at us once, and then they would laugh grimly. I was so ashamed that I was unable to show my face in public, did not dare to interrupt or speak a few words in any meeting discussing either important or trivial businesses. Although our *Zongduozhu* has several times conveyed messages to enlighten us, saying that the revenge for Yin *Xiangzhu* is the business of the entire *Tian Di Hui*, not the responsibility of one hall, the Green Wood Hall, only, the cold words and sarcastic comments of the brothers from other halls cannot be simply dismissed. From now on, it's going to be substantially different."

“Right, right,” another man replied, “Li *Dage* is right, we must take this opportunity to take on the task and complete it with one sustained effort, do a large-scale effort to accomplish several more great undertaking. This evil thief Oboi had a reputation as the ‘number one warrior of Manchuria’; today he died under our hands, thus those number two warrior, number three warrior, number four warrior and so on will be scared to death!” As they heard this, the people roared in laughter again.

Wei Xiaobao mused, “One minute you cried, the next minute you laughed, just like an upside-down child.”

Suddenly there was a cold voice from among the crowd, “Was it us, the Green Wood Hall, who killed Oboi?”

As soon as the people heard this, silence fell. More than two hundred people assembled in that hall, but in an instant ‘the crow and peacock made no sound’. After a long while, someone said, “Although the one who killed Oboi was someone else, it was because we, the Green Wood Hall who raided Prince Kang’s mansion. Only by taking advantage of the confusion was that person able to kill Oboi.”

The person who previously spoke said again in cold voice, “So that’s how it is.”

The man with the coarse and loud voice said, “Qi *Laosan*[80], what is the meaning of your words?”

Still with a cold voice the one called Qi *Laosan* replied, “What meaning do I have? I don’t have any meaning, not the least bit! It’s just that when the brethrens from the other halls say: This achievement of Green Wood Hall is really impressive! But I wonder which brother of your precious hall actually killed Oboi?’ If this question is asked, I am afraid it will be somewhat difficult for us to answer. There is no harm in all of us thinking: is it possible that other people will ask this question? I am afraid in one thousand people, there will be nine-hundred and ninety

nine people who will ask the question! Now we are blowing our own horns, pasting gold on our own faces, won’t it be rather … rather … hey, hey, we all understand it in our hearts!” The crowd fell silent completely. They all felt that his words were sharp and extremely not pleasant to hear, but it was the truth, and it was hard to refute.

After a long while, the tall and slim old man said, "This is the little eunuch from the Qing Palace who killed Oboi; the result of an accident arising from many causes. It was Yin *Xiangzhu*'s own spirit from heaven who gave his blessing secretly, using the hand of a child to get rid of this big traitor. All of us are upright and honest men, we won't tell any lie contrary to our conscience." The crowd looked at each other, some people could not help but shaking their heads; at first they were in high spirit, but thinking that the person killing Oboi was not a brother from the Green Wood Hall, immediately their spirit was dampened.

The tall and slim old man said, "For the last two years, our Hall is without a leader. Everybody pushed *Xiongdi* to temporarily perform the duty of a *Xiangzhu*. Now that Yin *Xiangzhu*'s enmity has been avenged, *Xiongdi* is laying down the authority tablet in front of Yin *Xiangzhu*'s spirit. I am asking all the brothers to elect another capable man." Finished speaking, he kneeled down in front of the spirit tablet, while lifting high a wooden tablet with both hands. He kowtowed several times before standing up and put down the authority tablet in front of the spirit tablet.

"Li *Dage*," a man said, "In the past two years, you have handled our Society's affairs clearly and orderly. In my opinion, other than you, who else fit to hold the *Xiangzhu* position? You don't have to be modest, just pick up the authority tablet again!" Everybody was silent for half a day.

Another man said, "The *Xiangzhu* position is not for us to

decide, we can't simply pick someone and appoint him to be the *Xiangzhu*. It is for the *Zongduozhu* to appoint somebody."

The first man replied, "Although it is indeed the custom, the usual practice is that after each Hall reach a decision, we will report it to our leader. Our leader has never turned down anybody. The so-called 'appointment' is nothing more than a routine business."

The other man replied, "As far as *Xiongdi* knows, the new *Xiangzhu* of each Hall has always been recommended by the former *Xiangzhu*. Either when the old *Xiangzhu* is old, or sick, or on his deathbed and is leaving his last wish. It has never been our customs for the brothers to elect the *Xiangzhu* replacement."

The first man said, "Yin *Xiangzhu* was unfortunate to be harmed by Oboi, how could he leave his last words behind? Jia *Laoliu* [Ol' Jia the six (see also Chapter 2)], it is not that you did not know this matter, why are you bringing it up now? I understand your intention, you oppose Li *Dage* to be our Hall's *Xiangzhu*, you harbor an ill-will, it's a conspiracy."

Hearing the name Jia *Laoliu*, Wei Xiaobao shivered involuntarily, he remembered the person the salt smugglers in Yangzhou was looking for was precisely this man. Turning his head to look at him, he saw that Jia *Laoliu* was a bald man, the little pigtail on his head barely had any hair left, there was a scar from a knife cut on his face.

Jia *Laoliu* angrily said, "What ill-will? What conspiracy? Cui *Xiazi* [lit. 'Blind Cui'], speak more clearly, but don't make slanderous accusation against others."

The man surnamed Cui had lost his left eye. "Humph!" he said loudly, "Open the skylight and speak frank and straightforward remarks. In the Green Wood Hall, who did not know that you want to support your *Jiefu* [husband of older sister, brother-in-

law] Guan *Fuzi* [lit. 'Master' Guan, as in 'teacher' or 'scholar'] to be the *Xiangzhu*. If Guan *Fuzi* becomes the *Xiangzhu*, you will become the Lord State Uncle, won't that mean you hold the power in your hands? You want the wind you get the wind, you want the rain you get the rain."

In loud voice Jia *Laoliu* said, "Whether Guan *Fuzi* is my brother-in-law or not, it is an entirely different matter. This time we are breaking into Prince Kang's mansion, it was under the leadership of Guan *Fuzi*, and it was a great success, as well as we returned home victorious. Based on my brother-in-law's talent, can't he be the *Xiangzhu*? Li *Dage* qualifies as a senior, his interpersonal relationship is good, I have nothing against him. However, in term of ability, Guan *Fuzi* is much better."

Cui *Xiazi* suddenly roared in laughter; a laughter filled with contempt. Jia *Laoliu* angrily said, “What are you laughing at? Did I say something wrong?”

“It’s not wrong,” Cui *Xiazi* said with a laugh, “How can our Jia *Laoliu* said anything wrong? I just feel that Guan *Fuzi*’s ability is a bit too formidable. He can go over five mountain passes[81], but he cannot behead six generals. At the last moment, he let an outsider, a child, killed our personal archenemy Oboi with a knife.”

Suddenly a man walked out from among the crowd, with an angry expression he stood in front of the spirit tablet. Wei Xiaobao recognized this man as the long-bearded old man who led the attack to Prince Kang’s mansion. He saw his long beard was floating in front of his chest; he looked very imposing. Actually, this man’s surname was Guan, given name Anji. Because of his spirited-looking beard and his surname was Guan, everybody called him Guan *Fuzi*.

Guan *Fuzi*’s eyes glowered at Cui *Xiazi*, with a gruff voice he said, “Cui *Xiongdi*, if you have a disagreement with Jia *Laoliu*,

you may say anything you like; I, the one surnamed Guan, will not blame you. We are all good brothers, in front of Wan Yunlong *Dage*'s spirit tablet we have sworn made a pledge that whatever happens we are going to live and die together. You slandered me like that, what is your intention?"

Cui *Xiazi* was somewhat afraid, he took a step back and said, "I ... I do not dare to slander you." He paused for a moment before continuing, "Guan *Erge* [second (older) brother], you ... if you endorse the election of Li *Dage* to be our Hall's *Xiangzhu*, then ... then *Xiongdi* is going to kowtow to you to apologize, just consider me saying wrong words."

With an ashen face Guan Anji said, "Kowtow and apology, how can I dare to accept? Whoever will become our Hall's *Xiangzhu*, it's not for the one surnamed Guan to decide. Cui *Xiongdi*, you are not *Tian Di Hui*'s *Zongduozhu* either; who will become the Green Wood Hall's *Xiangzhu*, it is not for you to say."

Cui *Xiazi* took another step backward; in a loud voice he said, "Guan *Erge*, by what you said, isn't it obvious that you are slandering me? What kind of man am I, Cui *Xiazi*? Even in eighteen reincarnations I would still fall short to be *Tian Di Hui*'s *Zongduozhu*. I was only saying that Li Lishi, Li *Dage* is a person of good moral standing and reputation; in our Hall, there is none like Li *Dage*, whom people admire from the bottom of their hearts. If we do not ask Li *Dage* to be our Hall's *Xiangzhu*, I am afraid eight or nine out of ten brothers may refuse to accept it."

From the crowd someone said, "Cui *Xiazi*, you are not eight or nine out of ten brothers in our Hall, how do you know eight or nine out of ten brothers may not accept it? In my opinion, Li *Dage* is indeed a very good man, everybody enjoys having a drink with him, Senior, or having a chat with him under the warm sun; indeed nothing can't be better. However, speaking about being our Hall's *Xiangzhu*, I am afraid eight or nine out of ten brothers may think otherwise."

Another man said, "Indeed, what Zhang *Xiongdi* said is very true. What if he is a person of good moral standing and reputation? Our *Tian Di Hui* objective is fighting the Qing and restoring the Ming, not studying Confucius or speaking about compassion, duty, propriety and integrity. Will a person of good moral standing and reputation scare the Tatars that they would run away? If you want to find a person of good moral standing and reputation, you will find a lot of old *xiucai* at schools, speaking about poetry and Confucius' sayings all day long." The crowd roared in laughter as they hear this.

A Taoist priest said, "In your opinion, who should be our Hall's *Xiangzhu*?"

The man replied, "First, he must work toward the goal of our *Tian Di Hui*: fighting the Qing and restoring the Ming. Second, he must strive for our Green Wood Hall so that it will stand out among *Tian Di Hui*'s Halls, managing it 'with sound and color'. Whoever is most capable and most talented among our brethrens, will have our support to be the *Xiangzhu*."

The Taoist priest said, "Most capable and most talented, in this poor Taoist opinion, Li *Dage* is still the best."

From the crowd, dozens of people shouted, “We nominate Guan *Fuzi*! How can Li *Dage*’s skill be compared to Guan *Fuzi*?”

The Taoist priest said, “Guan *Fuzi* can handle matters powerfully, everybody admires that quality …”

“That’s right,” the crowd called out, “What else do you have to say?”

“Wait a moment, wait a moment, let me finish!” the Taoist priest shook both of his hands, “Guan *Fuzi* is hot tempered, he often flares up and curses people in anger. Right now he is no more than an ordinary brother, yet when we look at him, we are 30% afraid of him. If he becomes the *Xiangzhu*, I am afraid we won’t have a day of peace and quite anymore.”

A man said, “Recently Guan *Fuzi*’s temper has mellowed quite a bit. If he becomes the *Xiangzhu*, he will be even better.”

The Taoist priest shook his head, “The rivers and mountains are easy to change, a man’s character is much harder to change. Guan *Fuzi*’s temperament is cultivated over several decades. Granted that he was able to repress it for a while, but can he repress it for a year or half a year? Being the *Xiangzhu* of Green Wood Hall is an important matter of a lifetime. We can’t allow just because a man’s temperament is not good, the brothers are thrown into disharmony; everybody’s heart will be discouraged, unavoidably the important matter will fail.”

Jia *Laoliu* said, “Priest Xuanzhen, I think your own temper is not that great either.”

Hearing his words, the Taoist priest, Hao Xuanzhen, laughed aloud and said, “It’s exactly because everybody knows himself best – the poor Taoist’s temper is not good, I have offended too many people – that as much as possible, I do not want to open my mouth. It’s just that electing our Hall’s *Xiangzhu* is an important matter, the poor Taoist cannot help but must say several sentences. The poor Taoist’s temper is not good, I do not have any problem of not becoming the *Xiangzhu*. I have no problem if there is any brother who thinks I am not pleasing to the eye, and does not want to talk to me. I am fine if any of you want to distance yourself from me. But if the poor Taoist became the *Xiangzhu*, how can I ignore you or distance myself from you?”

“Nobody nominates you as the *Xiangzhu*,” Jia *Laoliu* said, “Why do you come out and ‘pull to the east and push to the west’ [i.e. ramble incoherently]?”

Xuanzhen flew into rage. “Jia *Laoliu*,” he said in stern voice, “When friends in Jianghu see the poor Taoist, most of them would address me as *Daozhang* [Taoist Priest]. Even *Zongdouzhu* shows respect to me. It’s only you who dare to be

this rude to me. You … you are a dog threatens relying on your master’s power. You want to bully me, Xuanzhen? It’s not that easy! Let me tell you clearly: if Guan *Fuzi* wants to be our Hall’s *Xiangzhu*, I, Xuanzhen, will be the first to disapprove! If he wants to be the *Xiangzhu*, he must accomplish something first. If this matter is accomplished, it’s possible that the poor Taoist will not oppose him!”

At first, when Jia *Laoliu* heard him saying ‘a dog threatens relying on your master’s power’, he was very angry, but first: he realized that Priest Xuanzhen’s martial art skill was superior; even though he was really angry, he did not dare to contradict him openly. Second: this Taoist priest indeed had a resounding reputation in Jianghu; that their *Zongdouzhu* showed respect was not a false statement. He wanted to support his brother-in-law to become the *Xiangzhu*, but if this person strongly opposing the nomination, he would indeed be a major obstacle. Hearing that the Taoist priest was willing not to oppose providing his brother-in-law accomplish something, Jia *Laoliu* was delighted. He asked, "What matter is that? Let's hear it."

Priest Xuanzhen said, "The first matter that Guan *Fuzi* has to accomplish is that he must divorce the '100% real gold', Golden Saber Jia!"

As soon as these words were spoken, the people in the hall roared in laughter. The '100% real gold', Golden Saber Jia Priest Xuanzhen mentioned was Guan *Fuzi*'s wife, Jia *Laoliu*'s own older sister. Her weapon was a pair of golden sabers, so when people bantered with her, they often asked her, "Guan *Saozi* [older sister-in-law/older brother's wife], your two golden sabers, are they real gold or fake[82] gold?" And then with a straight face she would reply, "They are 100% gold, 100% gold! How can they be fake?" Thereupon she received the nickname '100% real gold'.

By asking Guan *Fuzi* to divorce his wife, wouldn't that mean Priest Xuanzhen was clearly trying to make Jia *Laoliu* look bad? Actually, although the '100% real gold', Golden Saber Jia was a frank and outspoken, she was a good woman. Her brother, Jia *Laoliu* was not a bad man either, it was just that he was trying to raise his brother-in-law too high. Guan *Fuzi* was short-tempered, he had offended a lot of people; unavoidably, a lot of people were complaining behind his back.

Guan Anji stretched out his hand and 'bang!' he heavily slap the table, while shouting angrily, "Priest Xuanzhen, what are you talking about? Whether I become the *Xiangzhu*or not, it doesn't have anything to do with my wife, why did you bring her into this?"

Before Priest Xuanzhen replied, someone in the crowd coldly said, "Guan *Fuzi*, Yin *Xiangzhu* did not offend you, why did you hit his spirit table?"

The table Guan *Fuzi* struck was indeed the table where the memorial tablet was placed. Guan Anji was startled. Although he was irritable, he was actually very quick-witted. In a loud voice he said, "*Xiongdi* has made a mistake!" He kneeled down in front of the memorial tablet and kowtowed several times, saying, "Yin *Dage*, in his anger, *Xiongdi* has slapped your memorial tablet. It is entirely my fault. I am asking your spirit, Senior, in heaven to forgive me." While saying that, 'bang, bang, bang!' he banged his head against the floor several times. Seeing him doing so, most of the people there no longer hold it against him.

Cui *Xiazi* said, "Everybody, look! Guan *Fuzi* is straightforward and upright, he is a real man, but he is short-tempered and unable to remain calm. When he made a mistake, he would immediately admit it, which is certainly very good. However, if he were the *Xiangzhu*, making one mistake often carry an enormous responsibility. Even if he readily admit it, what good

would it bring?"

Initially, Guan Anji was enjoying a good momentum by asking Priest Xuanzhen why he mentioned his wife, the '100% real gold', Golden Saber Jia; but in his anger, he struck Yin *Xiangzhu*'s memorial tablet, which was offensive to the people. Although he immediately kowtowed in front of Yin *Xiangzhu*'s memorial tablet so that the brothers no longer blame him, his momentum was gone; he felt it was inconvenient to continue arguing with Priest Xuanzhen.

Xuanzhen himself also seized the opportunity to retreat; he said with a laugh, "Guan *Fuzi*, you and I are brothers, from the cradle to the grave we go through countless fire and water together. It's not worthwhile that we lose this brotherhood over a battle of the tongues. Just now the poor Taoist was only joking, please forgive me. When you go home, don't tell Golden Saber Jia *Saozi* about this; otherwise, she would seize the poor Taoist's beard, that won't be fun!" The people broke into laughter again. Guan Anji was 30% afraid of this Taoist priest; without any choice he also laughed.

Afterwards, you said one thing, I said another, some say Li *Dage* was good, others say Guan *Fuzi* was better, all along it was difficult to reach the final decision. Suddenly someone was wailing; crying and speaking at the same time, "Yin *Xiangzhu*, oh Yin *Xiangzhu*, when you were alive, our Green Wood Hall was in perfect harmony, the brothers are like true blood brothers, everybody worked together for a common purpose, the important matter of fighting the Qing and restoring the Ming. Unfortunately you were harmed by that traitor Oboi. In our Green Wood Hall, there is no one else with your kind of ability: having both good interpersonal relationship and talent. Yin *Xiangzhu*, unless you rise again from the dead, I am afraid our Green Wood Hall will have endless argument with each other, we will become like a sheet of loose sand, we won't be as

prosperous as when you were still alive." Hearing this, many people were unable to refrain from shedding some tears.

Someone said, "Li *Dage* has Li *Dage*'s advantage, Guan *Fuzi* has Guan *Fuzi*'s advantage, both are our own good brothers, we can't have all the brothers to be at odds with each other over this *Xiangzhu* election. In my opinion, it will be best if we ask Yin *Xiangzhu*'s soul in heaven to help us decide. We will write both Li *Dage* and Guan *Fuzi*'s name, everybody will kowtow in front of Yin *Xiangzhu*'s memorial tablet and then draw the lot. It is the most fair method." Many people voiced their agreement.

Jia *Laoliu* loudly said, "This method is not good."

"Why is it not good?" someone asked.

"Who will draw the lot?" Jia *Laoliu* asked.

"We all can select one brother to do it," the man replied.

Jia *Laoliu* said, "I am afraid that man will have selfish desire and may not play fair."

Cui *Xiazi* angrily said, "In front of Yin *Xiangzhu*'s memorial tablet, who has such nerve, dare to deceive Yin *Xiangzhu*'s soul in heaven?"

Jia *Laoliu* said, "It's hard to fathom a person's mind, we must guard against it."

"F*ck your granny," Cui *Xiazi* cursed, "Most likely it's going to be you who cheat."

Jia *Laoliu* angrily said, “Who are you cursing at, kid?”

Cui *Xiazi* was also angry, “I am cursing you, kid! So what?”

“I have shown restraint long enough," Jia *Laoliu* said, "You cursed my granny, I can't tolerate it no matter what." 'Shua!' he drew his steel saber; with his left hand pointed at Cui *Xiazi* he shouted, "Cui *Xiazi*, let us have a duel outside at the courtyard."

Cui *Xiazi* slowly pulled his saber out and said, "You are the one who wanted a fight, I am forced to take up the challenge. Guan *Fuzi*, you heard it with your own ears."

Guan Anji said, "We are all brothers, we must not fight just because of this matter. Cui *Xiongdi*, you cursed my brother-in-law; you are in the wrong here."

Cui *Xiazi* said, "I knew you would place the blame on me. You have not become the *Xiangzhu*, you are already like this. If you were the *Xiangzhu*, what would happen then?"

Guan Anji angrily said, "Are you saying that you can curse other people's ancestor at will? You f*ucked my wife's younger brother's granny, then what am I to you?" The crowd could not help but laughing heartily. For a moment the hall was in chaos.

Seeing his brother-in-law was standing up for him, Jia *Laoliu* was even more angry. He was about to dash into the courtyard when someone reached out and blocked him, trying to persuade him, "Jia *Laoliu*, if you want your brother-in-law to become the *Xiangzhu*, you must not offend other people too much. If someone is offending you, you must yield one step to him."

Cui *Xiazi* slowly put his saber back into its scabbard, he said, "I am not afraid of you, it's just that we all take *yiqi* very seriously. Brothers must not fight using blades, staking our lives. In short, Guan *Fuzi* wants to become the *Xiangzhu*, I, the one surnamed Cui, will not approve, no matter what. Guan *Fuzi*'s temper I can tolerate, but Jia *Laoliu*'s temper is unbearable. *Yan Wang*[83] is easy to see, little demon is difficult to bear."

Wei Xiaobao was standing on the side. With the cool eye of a bystander, he found it rather amusing to hear and watch people arguing back and forth endlessly, some used obscenity to curse people, some wanted to fight with weapons. At first he thought

these people were Oboi's subordinates who wanted to kill him as a sacrifice to Oboi, but now he knew that they hated Oboi to their bones, it was as if a huge rock had fallen from his heart. But after hearing these people keep saying something like 'fighting the Qing, restoring the Ming', he started to grow anxious. "They must be thinking that I am a little eunuch of the Qing Palace," he mused, "No matter how I plead innocence, they won't believe me. As soon as the *Xiangzhu* position is decided, their first order of business must be to have me killed. I wonder if they would consider it 'fighting the Qing, restoring the Ming'? In front of them right now, other than *laozi*, who else is a Qing man? Besides, with me in here, I have heard their secrets; even if they would not kill me to close my mouth, they would definitely lock me up and I won't reincarnate forever. It would be better for *laozi* to slip away now." Slowly, step by step, he retreated toward the door. He was hoping the hall would become chaotic again so that he could run away.

He heard someone was saying, "Drawing a lot is too unreliable, it's a little too much like a child's play. I'll say, let Li *Dage* and Guan *Fuzi* have a martial art contest to determine victory or defeat, with fists and kicks is alright, using weapons is also alright, as long as they do not injure each other. Everybody else will stand on the side with eyes open wide, who wins and who loses will be seen clearly, nobody will have dissenting words."

Jia *Laoliu* was the first to approve, with a loud voice he said, “Good! Martial art contest to decide victory or defeat it is. If Li *Dage* wins, I, Jia *Laoliu* will support Li *Dage* as the *Xiangzhu*.”

As soon as he said that, Wei Xiaobao thought, “You approve the martial art contest because your brother-in-law’s martial art is superior to Li *Dage*’s, what is there to be contested?”

If even Wei Xiaobao could have this thought, naturally others could also think the same. One after another those who

supported Li voiced their objection; someone said, “Being the *Xiangzhu*, one must make the brothers of the entire Hall work together, it does not have too much to do with martial art.” “If the *Xiangzhu* position is decided based on martial art skill, then if someone within out Hall can defeat Guan *Fuzi*, will we let him to be the *Xiangzhu*?” “This is not *Xiangzhu* election, but a martial art competition stage. Guan *Fuzi* might as well erect the stage, let the heroes from all over the world come and compete.” “If that treacherous bandit Oboi did not die, he was the ‘number one warrior of Manchuria’; Guan *Fuzi* may not necessarily win over him. If Oboi had won on the martial art competition stage, could it be that we will invite him to become our *Xiangzhu*?” As the crowd heard this, they could not bear not to laugh.

In this confusion, suddenly someone said coldly, "Yin *Xiangzhu*, oh Yin *Xiangzhu*, after your death, nobody look up on you anymore. The oath we made in front of your memorial tablet has turned into damn bullsh1t." Wei Xiaobao recognized the voice, it belonged to Qi *Laosan* who loved to say cold words and make sarcastic comments.

The crowd immediately quiet down. And then almost together several people asked, "Qi *Laosan*, what do you mean by that?"

With a cold laugh Qi *Laosan* said, "Many years ago, I, the one surnamed Qi, kowtowed in front of Wan Yunlong *Dage* and Yin Lizhu's memorial tablets, I pricked my finger and shed some blood and made a heavy oath, vowing to avenge Yin *Xiangzhu*. With my own mouth I said, 'Whichever brother kill Oboi and avenged Yin *Xiangzhu* deep enmity, I, Qi Biaoqing, will revere him as our Hall's *Xiangzhu*, will all my heart I will faithfully obey his commands, and promise never to go against him!' Qi *Laosan* indeed said those words. The one surnamed Qi intends to keep his words; it is definitely not a dog fart!" In that instant, the hall grew very quiet, not the least bit of noise was heard. Actually,

everybody in that hall had made the same vow.

After a while, it was again Jia *Laoliu* who lost his patient first. He said, "Qi *San'ge* [third (older) brother], what you said is not wrong, in fact, everybody had said the same thing, including me, Jia *Laoliu*. Naturally it was not an empty oath. But ... but ... you know it, I know it, everybody know that the one who killed Oboi was this ... this ..." He turned around looking for Wei Xiaobao, suddenly he saw Wei Xiaobao was at the door with one foot already outside the hall, ready to flee. "Grab him," Jia *Laoliu* shouted, "Don't let him run away!"

Wei Xiaobao pulled his foot wishing to dash out. In an instant six, seven men pounced on him. About a dozen hands grabbed his body at the same time and forcefully dragged him back into the hall. "Hey, hey," Wei Xiaobao screamed, "Turtle bastards, why are you pulling *laozi* back?" He presumed that this time he would not live, so he might as well enjoy hurling curses at them.

A man wearing *xiucai*[84] attire, including the hat, walked out from among the crowd. "*Xiao Xiongdi*," he said, "Don't curse people."

Wei Xiaobao recognized his voice, he said, "You are Qi *Laosan*?"

That man was indeed Qi *Laosan*, Qi Biaoqing. "You know me?" he asked in surprise.

"I know your Ma!" Wei Xiaobao replied.

Qi Biaoqing had 30% bookworm disposition, he did not realize Wei Xiaobao was cursing at him. He was even more surprised, "How did you know my Ma?" he asked.

"Your Ma and I are old friends," Wei Xiaobao replied, "We are old lovers."

The crowd roared in laugher. "This little eunuch is a smooth-

talker!" they commented.

Qi Biaoqing's entire face turned red. "Stop laughing!" he said. Immediately his face turned stern as he asked, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, why did you kill Oboi?"

Wei Xiaobao got a sudden inspiration. He said in loud voice, "That traitor Oboi had done not a few of evil deeds, he had killed countless our Han people's heroes and warriors. I, Wei Xiaobao, cannot coexist with him. I ... I was fine until he captured me and put me in the Imperial Palace and made me a eunuch. I wish I could chop his head and made him into minced meat, and throw him into the pond to feed the tortoise." He knew that the more vehement he was and the more he aroused indignation, the greater his chance of survival would be.

The people in the hall looked at each other in astonishment. Qi Biaoqing asked, "How long have you become a eunuch?"

"How long? Not even half a year yet," Wei Xiaobao replied, "I am originally from Yangzhou, he caught me and brought me to Beijing. Hot piece mama, stinky Oboi is dead I still want him to go up the mountain of blades, to go down the deep fryer, to roll over nail board and have that thief Oboi's bones penetrated." A succession of Yangzhou-style cussing blurted out of his mouth.

A middle-aged man nodded his head and said, "He is really from Yangzhou." His own voice carried a Yangzhou accent.

"Uncle," Wei Xiaobao said, "We, Yangzhou people, were tragically killed by the Tatars; they killed us for ten days in a row, from morning to night without stopping. My grandpa, my grandma, my first grandma, my second grandma, my third grandma, my fourth grandma, not a single one escaped from the Tatars. The Manchu ghosts went on killing spree from the Eastern Gate all the way to the Western Gate, from the Southerm Gate all the way to the Northern Gate, all under this Oboi's order. I ... I simply cannot live under the same sky as

him, that's how deep my enmity is." He tried to remember what people say about the 'Ten Days of Yangzhou' massacre, the more he said, the more believable he was. Hearing him, the people were emotionally moved, they nodded their heads again and again.

"No wonder, no wonder!" Guan Anji said.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Not only my grandpa, grandma, even my father was also killed by Oboi."

"Poor child, poor child," Qi Biaoqing said.

Cui *Xiazi* asked, "How old are you this year?"

"Thirteen or fourteen years old," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Cui *Xiazi* said, "The massacre at Yangzhou was more than twenty years ago, how can your father be killed by Oboi?"

Wei Xiaobao thought something was amiss, his lies had been discovered, thereupon he blurted out whatever was in his mind, "How should I know? I wasn't even born yet, it was what my ma told me."

Cui *Xiazi* said, "Even if you were born after his death, it's still impossible."

"Cui *Xiongdi*," Qi Biaoqing said, "You are wrong. This *Xiao Xiongdi* said his father was killed by Oboi, he did not say that he was killed during the 'Ten days of Yangzhou'. Oboi was an arrogant officer, until today, in which year he did not kill anybody? Our Yin *Xiangzhu* was killed by Oboi; it happened only a little bit more than two years ago."

"Yes, yes!" Cui *Xiazi* said.

Jia *Laoliu* suddenly asked, "*Xiao* … Friend, you said that Oboi has killed countless heroes and warriors, what does it have to do with you?"

"Who says it has nothing to do with me?" Wei Xiaobao replied,

“I have a good friend who was arrested by Oboi at the Qing Palace and was killed. He and I were caught together.”

“Who is it, who is it?” the crowd asked together.

“This man has quite a reputation in Jianghu,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “His name is Mao Shiba!”

“Oh!” more than a dozen men exclaimed. “Mao Shiba is your friend?” Jia *Laoliu* asked, “But he did not die.”

Wei Xiaobao was delighted, “He didn’t die?” he said, “That’s wonderful! Jia *Laoliu*, when you cursed the salt smugglers in Yangzhou, Mao Shiba fought them on your behalf. I was also helping him to fight.”

Jia *Laoliu* scratched his head, “Is there really such thing?” he wondered.

“Very good!” Guan Anji said, “Whether this little friend is indeed a friend or a foe, it is a matter of great importance. *Laoliu*, take several brothers with you, go get Mao Shiba, invite him to identify him.”

“Yes!” Jia *Laoliu* complied; he turned around and went out the hall.

Qi Biaoqing pulled a chair. “*Xiao Xiongdi*,” he said, “Please sit down!”

Wei Xiaobao was not bashful at all, he sat down. Someone gave him a bowl of noodles and a cup of tea. Wei Xiaobao was indeed very hungry, he ate the noodles clean. Guan Anji, Qi Biaoqing, and the one they called Li *Dage*, Li Lishi, sat with him and chatted. Their tone was quite polite, but actually they were interrogating him about his life and what he had been through lately. Wei Xiaobao did not conceal anything, occasionally he would toot his horn, hurl some cuss words to Oboi, and tell them in detail how he helped Kangxi capture Oboi. Only the fact that he learned martial art from Hai Laogong and Kangxi

personally stab Oboi on the back, he did not mention at all. Guan Anji and the others had already heard about how Oboi was arrested by the young emperor and a group of little eunuchs. Listening to Wei Xiaobao's vivid narrative, they knew most likely it was not a fabrication.

Guan Anji sighed and said, "Oboi had a reputation as the Number One Warrior of Manchuria; not only he was killed by you, but he was captured also by you. It must have been the heaven's will."

They were chatting for about an hour. Guan Anji, Li Lishi, Qi Biaoqing and the others were Jianghu veterans with rich experience; although they felt that Wei Xiaobao's story was somewhat flippant and insincere, the crux of the story was unambiguous. Suddenly they heard footsteps, the door to the hall was pushed open, two men carrying a stretcher walked in. Jia *Laoliu* followed behind them; he said, "Brother-in-law, Mao Shiba has been invited here!"

Wei Xiaobao sprang up. He saw Mao Shiba was lying on the stretcher, his cheeks were hollow, his eye sockets sank deep, his countenance was extremely wan and sallow. Wei Xiaobao asked, "You … you are sick?"

When Jia *Laoliu* came to get him, Mao Shiba only knew that the Green Wood Hall of Tian Di Hui had an important matter they would like to discuss with him, but he did not know the nature of the matter. Now that he suddenly saw Wei Xiaobao, he was wild with joy. "Xiaobao," he called out, "You … you also ran away; that's wonderful! I … all this time I have been thinking about you. I was hoping that as soon as I recover, I will go back to the Imperial Palace to get you out. This … this is really good!"

At these words, the 30% remaining doubt that was still in everybody's hearts was swept away in an instant. This little eunuch was indeed Mao Shiba's friend, who was captured

together with him and was brought into the Qing Palace. Although Mao Shiba was not a member of Tian Di Hui, he was a man with quite a reputation in Jianghu, he always said one as one and two as two. Over the last few years, his arrest by the Qing court was a matter of public knowledge. Since Wei Xiaobao was his friend, naturally he could not be a real eunuch of the Qing Palace. Moreover, when Mao Shiba talked, they saw how he revealed his true feelings, obviously his friendship with the child was extremely good.

"Mao *Dage*," Wei Xiaobao said, "Are … are you injured?"

Mao Shiba sighed and said, "Ay, when I ran away from the Imperial Palace that night, I managed to reach the Palace gate, finally I met some imperial bodyguards. It was one against five. I killed two of them, but I also received two saber chops. I desperately ran out of the Palace gate. More imperial bodyguards from the Palace ran after me. It was actually a dead end for me. Fortunately Tian Di Hui friends lent me their hands, and thus my life was spared. Were you also being rescued by the good friends of Tian Di Hui?"

Immediately the look on Guan Anji and the others' faces turned awkward. They felt that the way they handled this matter was not exactly too pretty. Who would have thought that Wei Xiaobao said, "Exactly. That old eunuch forced me to become a little eunuch. It was not until today that I finally able to escape. Fortunately I came across these … these gentlemen from Tian Di Hui."

The Tian Di Hui warriors secretly let out a relieved breath, they knew that by saying that, Wei Xiaobao was giving careful consideration to their face; they were secretly grateful, thinking that although this boy was young, he was a good friend, indeed.

Right away Jia *Laoliu* invited Mao Shiba and Wei Xiaobao to take a rest in a side room, while the Green Wood Hall warriors

continued their conference in the main hall. Mao Shiba's injury was very heavy, although he had been recuperating for several months, his body was still very weak. Just now when he was being brought up on the stretcher, his body was jolted and shaken, his wound was aching. Mentally he was very tired; he wanted to talk some more, but he simply did not have any strength. Wei Xiaobao thought, "No matter what, they are not going to kill me." His mood improved tremendously. Curling on a large round-backed wooden armchair, he fell asleep immediately. In his sleep, he felt someone lifted him up, put him on a bed, and covered him with a quilt.

When he woke up the next morning, someone came and brought water with which to wash his face, a cup of green tea, and a large bowl of meat noodles. "They treat *laozi* better and better," he thought, "Unexpectedly they regard me like a big boss." But then he saw two men standing outside the side room, and two more men standing outside the window. Although they pretended to be idle and were chatting with each other, it was obvious that they had received order to watch over him, perhaps they were afraid he might escape.

Wei Xiaobao was a bit anxious; he thought, "If they really treat me as an honored guest, why did they send these four men to guard me?" Suddenly his childish heart rose up. "Humph, I am afraid guarding Wei Xiaobao is not that easy. I am going to slip out and have a stroll, I want to see how these four idiots will deal with me!" After looking clearly at his surroundings, he hatched a plan. Straight away he reached out and pushed hard the window facing east. At the noise, four men looked to the window. When Wei Xiaobao was sure that these four men's eyes were still looking at the window, he slammed the side room's door to the inside, and quickly rolled underneath the bed.

Hearing the door, the four men turned their heads around and

saw the double door was already open; the leaves were swinging continuously. They were shocked. These four men were indeed sent to watch over Wei Xiaobao. When they saw the door open, their first thought was that Wei Xiaobao had already escaped. “Aiyo!” they all called out together, and rushed into the room. They saw Mao Shiba was still sleeping soundly on the bed, but Wei Xiaobao was nowhere to be seen.

“This child couldn’t be too far,” one man said, “Let’s spread out and pursue him, and report this to our superior.”

“Yes!” the other tree complied, and together they rushed out of the room. Two of them leaped up to the roof.

Wei Xiaobao coughed, and then got out from under the bed and haughtily walked toward the main hall. He pushed the door and saw Guan Anji and Li Lishi were sitting side by side, while the men sent to guard him breathlessly reported, “That … that child suddenly ran … ran away; we don’t know … where he is.” Before he finished, he saw Wei Xiaobao suddenly appear. “Ah!” the man exclaimed, his eyes grew big as he stared at Wei Xiaobao, speechless.

Wei Xiaobao stretched his body and said, “Li *Dage*, Guan *Fuzi*, how are you?”

Guan Anji and Li Lishi looked at each other, and then said to the men, “Dismissed! You are useless!” Immediately they laughed toward Wei Xiaobao and said, “Please sit down, did you sleep well last night?”

With a chuckle Wei Xiaobao sat down and said, “Very well, very well!”

The main hall door suddenly burst open as the other two men rushed in. “Guan *Fuzi*,” one of them shouted, that … that child has gone …” Suddenly he saw Wei Xiaobao sitting there. “Oh!” he cried out in amazement, “He … he …”

Wei Xiaobao could not help but laughing aloud as he said, “You

four men are really useless, you can't even watch over a child. If I really wanted to run away, I am already gone by now."

A foolish-looking man asked, "How did you get out? There must be something in my eyes, I did not see even a shadow, yet you were already gone."

Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "I know the art of invisibility; I can teach it to you if you like."

Guan Anji frowned; he waved his hands to the two men and said, "Dismissed!"

The foolish-looking man was still asking, "There is really the art of invisibility? No wonder, no wonder."

Li Lishi said, "*Xiao Xiongdi* is young, but smart and sharp, making people quite admire you."

Suddenly they heard faint hoof beats in the distant, a large number of riders were coming their way. Guan Anji and Li Lishi stood up immediately. "Tatars' troops?" Li Lishi said in a low voice. Guan Anji nodded. Pointing his finger to the door he let out three shrill whistles. Five men rushed into the hall.

"Tell everybody to get ready!" Guan Anji said, "Tell Jia *Laoliu* to lead several brothers to protect Master Mao Shiba. A large number of Tatars' troops have arrived, we can't face them in battle, we must retreat separately per pre-arranged routes."

The five men complied and went out to transmit the order. Everywhere the Tian Di Hui people were roused. Guan Anji said, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, you'd better stay with me."

Suddenly a man rushed into the hall and said loudly, "*Zongduozhu* has arrived!"

"What?" Guan Anji and Li Lishi asked together.

The man said, "*Zongduozhu*, accompanied by five Halls' *Xiangzhu*, are riding toward this place."

Guan and Li, two people were delighted; they both asked, “How do you know?”

The man replied, “Subordinate met *Zongduozhu* on the way, he personally ordered subordinate to inform his arrival in advance.”

Seeing the man had run and was out of breath, Guan Anji nodded and said, “Very well, you go and take a rest.” He let out a whistle to summon the guard, and issued his order, “It’s not Tatars’ troops, it’s *Zongduozhu*’s arrival! Tell everybody to go out and welcome him.”

As soon as the news spread, the building was buzzing with excitement. Holding Wei Xiaobao’s hand, Guan Anji said, “*Xiao Xiongdi*, our Society’s *Zongduozhu* has arrived. Let us greet him together!”

Chapter 8

Coming across distinguished guest by accident as if having a previous appointment, famous reputation constantly in fear of being seen without any reason.

(Translated by Foxs)

Altogether Tian Di Hui had ten Halls. The two empty chairs in the middle of the room, one belonged the Third Prince Zhu, the other belonged to Zheng Wangye. Chen Jinnan took the remaining seat. Each Hall's Hall Master then reported the situation in various provinces.

Wei Xiaobao followed Guan Anji, Li Lishi, and the other

warriors outside the door, he saw two, three hundred men standing in two rows shaped like a funnel, their faces showed excitement. A moment later, two men carrying a stretcher with Mao Shiba on it came out.

Li Lishi said, “Mao Shiba, you are our guest, no need to be so polite.”

Mao Shiba said, “I’ve long heard of Chen *Zongduozhu*’s illustrious name, it’s really like thunder piercing my ears. Today I have the opportunity to pay a formal visit, even if … even if I have to die today, my death …. my death won’t be in vain.” His voice was still without any strength, but his face flushed, showing he was in high spirit.

They heard the sound of hoof beats was coming near, about a dozen horses were galloping near. Before they even arrived, the first three riders jumped down from their mounts. Li Lishi and the others rushed forward to greet them, they held hands with those three riders and talked; they seemed to know each other very intimately.

Wei Xiaobao heard one of them say, “*Zongduozhu* is waiting ahead of us; Li *Dage*, Guan *Fuzi*, and other brothers, please come and see him …” These several people conferred with each other while still standing. Li Lishi, Guan Anji, Qi Biaoqing, Priest Xuanzhen, and the others, six people in all, mounted their horses and sped away with these incoming men.

Mao Shiba was disappointed, “Chen *Zongduozhu* is not coming?” he asked. But nobody around him knew the answer to that question. They were all dejected because they could not see their *Zongduozhu*.

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, “Did someone owe you all ten thousand *taels* and did not pay? Or perhaps you lost your wife and your pants in gambling? Your granny, why are your expressions so ugly?”

After a long time, someone on horseback galloped by. He was conveying an order, mentioning thirteen names, telling them to meet with *Zongduozhu*. Those thirteen men were delighted; they rushed toward their mounts and galloped away.

Wei Xiaobao asked Mao Shiba, "Mao *Dage*, is Chen *Zongduozhu* a very old man?"

Mao Shiba replied, "I … I have never … never seen him. Everybody in Jianghu admires Chen *Zongduozhu*, but to see his … the Senior's face may be really difficult."

"Hey, hey," Wei Xiaobao laughed, in his heart he said, "Humph, damn it, what an arrogant guy, what's so special about him anyway? *Laozi d*oes not want to see him."

Seeing this situation, the crowd of warriors knew that most likely their *Zongduozhu* would not come. But they still cherished a one in ten thousand chance that he might, thereupon they all stood waiting at the main gate. After standing for a long time, some of them sat down. Someone advised Mao Shiba, "Master Mao, you'd better go back to your room and rest. If our *Zongduozhu* arrives, we'll invite Master Mao to meet him as soon as possible."

Mao Shiba shook his head and said, "No! I am going to wait here. It's an honor to meet Chen *Zongduozhu*, if *zaixia*[***[85]***] is not waiting outside, that … that will be too respectful. Ay, I wonder if during my lifetime, I, Mao Shiba, will have the good fortune to see the Senior's face."

Wei Xiaobao had followed Mao Shiba from Yangzhou to Beijing. Listening to what he said along the way, Mao Shiba did not have any favorable impression of various Wulin personalities, but toward this Chen *Zongduozhu*, he showed a complete reverence. Unconsciously Wei Xiaobao was also infected by his sentiment, and did not dare to curse in his heart anymore.

Suddenly they heard hoof beats again, some people were galloping near. Those who sat on the ground leaped on their feet. Everybody craned his neck; everybody hoped that the person the *Zongduozhu* want to meet this time would be him. Sure enough, four envoys came by. Their leaders dismounted the horse and cupped his fist, saying, "*Zongduozhu* wishes to invite Mao Shiba, Master Mao, and Wei Xiaobao, Master Wei, to grant him the favor of meeting the two gentlemen."

Mao Shiba cheered, he leaped up from the stretcher, but "Aiyo!" he cried, and fell back onto the stretcher. "Go quickly, go quickly!" he called out.

Wei Xiaobao was also very happy, he thought, "Everybody has been calling me 'Gong-gong' too much, but nobody has ever called me 'master'. Ha ha … *laozi* is now Wei Xiaobao, Master Wei."

Two envoys took over the stretcher and hang it between two horses. Then they slowly walked. The other envoy gave his ride to Wei Xiaobao, while he took another horse to ride on, and followed behind the procession. The six of them travelled less than three *li* on the main road, before they turned right onto a small lane. Along the way they met two or three men, either sitting or walking, either patrolling or guarding. The leader of the envoys stretched out his middle finger, ring finger and little finger and turned the fingers downward. The two guards nodded their heads; they also stretched out their fingers in secret signal. Wei Xiaobao noticed that the signals these people were showing were all different; he did not know the purpose of those signals.

After travelling for twelve, thirteen *li*, they arrived at a courtyard in front of a big building. The man guarding in front of the gate loudly announced, "The guests have arrived!" And then he opened the gate. Li Lishi, Guan Anji, and two men that Wei Xiaobao had never met before came out. They cupped their

fists and said, “Master Mao, Master Wei, welcome! Our humble Society’s *Zongduozhu* requests the pleasure of seeing you.”

Wei Xiaobao was utterly delighted; the thought, “Looks like my ‘Master Wei’ will stay after all!”

Mao Shiba struggled to stand up, he said, “How can I see Chen *Zongduozhu* like this? It’s really … really … Aiyo!” In the end he failed to get up and had to lie on the stretcher.

Li Lishi said, “Master Mao is injured, no need to be overly courteous.” He let the two guests to enter the main hall.

A man told Wei Xiaobao, “Master Wei, please sit here and have some tea. *Zongduozhu* wishes to have a chat with Master Mao first.” Straight away he took Mao Shiba in.

Wei Xiaobao drank a cup of tea, a servant served him four dishes of light refreshments. Wei Xiaobao took a piece and thought, “Compared to the ones in the Imperial palace, this light refreshments is far too inferior, it can't even reach the level of Lovely Spring Courtyard's." Unavoidably the high regard he had of *Zongduozhu*'s status was reduced a little bit. However, his stomach was really hungry, so he ate not a few of these despised light refreshments.

About the time needed to eat a meal later, Li Lishi and the others, four people, came out again. One of them was an elderly man with grizzled beard, who said, "*Zongduozhu* requests the pleasure of seeing Master Wei."

Wei Xiaobao busily chewed the pastry in his mouth and swallowed it hard into his belly. After wiping his hands onto the front of his clothes, he followed the four people inside. They stopped in front of a side room's door. The elderly man raised the curtain on the door and said, "Little White Dragon, Wei Xiaobao, Master Wei has arrived!"

Wei Xiaobao was pleasantly surprised; he thought, "Unexpectedly he knew my made-up nickname, Mao *Dage* must

have told them."

A middle-aged man dressed in scholar attire inside the room stood up; with a smile across his face he said, "Please come in!"

Wei Xiaobao walked in. His eyes were rolling in confusion. Guan Anji said, "This is our humble Society's Chen *Zongduozhu*."

Wei Xiaobao raised his head slightly to take a look; he saw the man had a kind expression, but his eyes were like lightning as he gazed directly toward Wei Xiaobao. He could not help but was startled; he bent his knees and kowtowed to that man. The scholar stooped down to help him up and said with a laugh, "No need to be overly courteous." As his arms were being pulled by the scholar, Wei Xiaobao's entire body was hot; he trembled involuntarily and was not able to continue his kowtow.

The scholar said with a laugh, "This *Xiao Xiongdi* captured and killed the number one warrior of Machuria, Oboi; he has taken revenge and swiped out the grudge of our countless Han people compatriots who have died under Oboi’s hands. In just a few days his name has shaken the land under the heavens. To be able to make a name this early in life is truly hard to come by, from the ancient time up to this day.”

Actually, the skin on Wei Xiaobao’s face was quite thick; if someone else had praised him like this, he would immediately blow his own trumpet. However, in front of this *Zongduozhu* who did not flaunt his own prestige, unexpectedly he could only hum and haw without able to say anything. The *Zongduozhu* pointed to a chair and said with a smile, “Please sit down!” While he sat down himself first.

Wei Xiaobao also sat down. But Li Lishi and the others, four people, remained standing. *Zongduozhu* smiled and said, “Master Mao Shiba told us that at the foot of Victory Hill in Yangzhou, by using a ruse *Xiao Xiongdi* has killed an officer of

the Qing army, the Black Dragon Whip Shi Song, and thus making a debut and render your first merit. This is already out of the ordinary. I wonder how did *Xiao Xiongdi* capture Oboi?”

Wei Xiaobao looked up, their eyes met, he could not stop his heart from thumping, in that instant the big talk and nonsense filling his heart suddenly vanished completely. When he opened his mouth, only the truth came out: how he obtained Kangxi's favor, how Oboi was being rude, how he cooperated with the young emperor in arresting Oboi, and so on. It's just that out of his respect toward Kangxi's loyalty, he did not mention anything about the young emperor stabbed Oboi on the back with a dagger. As the matter stands, he did mention how he threw the ash from the incense burner to Oboi's eyes and how he smashed his head with the copper incense burner, fully aware that if it was not a third-rate way of dealing with the enemy, then it was definitely a second-rate; yet he was unable to conceal it any longer.

The *Zongduozhu* listened attentively without asking any question, when Wei Xiaobao finished, he nodded and said, "So that's what happened. *Xiao Xiongdi*'s martial art skill is not of the same school as Master Mao's, I wonder which honorable master is your teacher?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "I only learn a little bit of martial art, it can't be considered coming from any honorable master. The Old Turtle did not really teach me martial art, all he taught me was fake martial art."

Although *Zongduozhu* was a man of vast experience and broad knowledge, he had not heard of any 'Old Turtle'; "The Old Turtle?" he asked.

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and said, "Old turtle is Hai Laogong. His real name is Hai Tianfu. Mao *Dage* and I were captured by him and were brought to the Palace ..." Speaking to this point, he suddenly realized he had made a mistake. To

the Tian Di Hui people he said that Mao Shiba and he were captured by Oboi, and now he said it was Hai Laogong who brought them to the Palace; how could the previous story not match the latter one? Luckily his ability in telling lies and covering up was top-notch; thereupon he said, "This old fellow was acting under Oboi's order to capture us, two people. I supposed Oboi was a very high ranking official, naturally he would not easily do the job personally."

"Hai Tianfu? Hai Tianfu?" *Zongduozhu* muttered to himself, "There is such character in the Tatars' Palace? *Xiao Xiongdi*, show me the martial art he taught you."

Even if the skin on Wei Xiaobao's face were thicker, he knew that in all honesty his martial art skill was not too brilliant; he said, "The old turtle only taught me fake martial art; he hated me for poisoning his eyes blind, so he did everything possible to harm me. This martial art is truly shameful."

The *Zongduozhu* nodded, he waved his left hand, Guan Anji and the others, four people withdrew outside the room and closed the door behind them. *Zongduozhu* asked, "How did you poison his eyes blind?"

In front of this heroic-spirited and imposing *Zongduozhu*, Wei Xiaobao felt that telling lies was extremely difficult; it was a lot more comfortable to tell the truth, a feeling that he had never experienced before. Thereupon he told him how he poisoned Hai Laogong blind, how he killed Xiao Guizi, how he masquerade as him and live as a little eunuch in the Palace. *Zongduozhu* was amazed and amused at the same time. He reached out with his left hand toward Wei Xiaobao's crotch and found that his pen1s and testicles were intact, Wei Xiaobao had not been 'purified' at all, indeed he was not a court eunuch. *Zongduozhu* could not help but letting out a sigh of relief as he smiled and said, "Wonderful, wonderful! I have a difficult problem in my mind and have not found the solution for a

while. Turns out *Xiao Xiongdi* has not been purified, you are not a court eunuch!" Slapping lightly on the table with his left hand, he said, "It's settled then! Yin *Xiongdi* has a successor, the Green Wood Hall has a leader."

Wei Xiaobao had no idea what he was talking about, he only saw *Zongduozhu*'s delighted expression, apparently he had found solution to the difficult problem weighing down his mind; Wei Xiaobao could not help but feeling happy as well.

With both hands behind his back, *Zongduozhu* was walking back and forth in the room, while talking to himself, "Not a single one of our Tian Di Hui's conducts and deeds was without any precedence. Everything starts with me, why should I care about people being shocked or about public criticism?" This literary-style speech of his was even more confusing to Wei Xiaobao.

The *Zongduozhu* said, "There are only you and me, two people right now, you don't need to be afraid to be embarrassed. I don't care whether the martial art Hai Tianfu taught you was fake or real, perform it and let me see."

Only then did Wei Xiaobao understand that the reason he sent Guan Anji, four people, out of the room was to avoid him being afraid of making a clown of himself. Seeing he had no other excuses, Wei Xiaobao said, "It's what the old turtle taught me, it's none of my business; if it is too laughable, you may curse him good."

The *Zongduozhu* smiled and said, "Just go on with your practice, don't worry!" Thereupon Wei Xiaobao started to perform his style, a small part of the 'Great Compassion Great Sorrow Thousand-Leaf Hand' Hai Laogong taught him, some of which he had already forgotten, but he still remembered most of it. *Zongduozhu* watched with rapt attention. After Wei Xiaobao finished performing the style, he nodded and said, "From the way you move, apparently you have learned Shaolin

Temple's 'big grappling technique', is that so?"

The 'big grappling technique' was the one Wei Xiaobao learned first, naturally he knew his mastery was even worse; actually, he wanted to avoid doing it clumsily to save his own face, but *Zongduozhu* seemed to know everything. Without any choice he said, "The old turtle also taught me several grappling technique to be used in fighting the young emperor." And then he performed several moves of the 'big grappling technique'.

The *Zongduozhu* smiled slightly and said, "Not bad!"

Wei Xiaobao said, "I knew you would laugh when you see it."

"I am not laughing at you!" the *Zongduozhu* said with a smile, "I like what I see. I think your memory, as well as your comprehension, are not bad; you are a talented individual. That move ‘white horse kick back’, Hai Tianfu deliberately taught you incorrectly, but you turned it into ‘carp props its gills’; you can make slight change automatically, you did not rigidly adhere to dead moves. That is very good!”

Wei Xiaobao had a sudden inspiration; he thought, “Apparently *Zongduozhu*’s martial art skill is a lot higher than the old turtle’s. If he is willing to teach me martial art, I, Wei Xiaobao, will definitely become a real hero, no longer a fake hero.” Leaning his head sideways, he stole a glance toward *Zongduozhu*; it so happened that *Zongduozhu*’s cold, electric eyes were gazing at him. Wei Xiaobao was always a mischievous person, even in front of imposing Empress Dowager, he still dared to face her up, but in front of this *Zongduozhu*, he did not dare to be wanton at all. As their eyes met, immediately he averted his gaze.

Zongduozhu said slowly, “What do you think the purpose of our Tian Di Hui?”

“Tian Di Hui is fighting the Qing, restoring the Ming,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Helping the Han people to kill the Tatars.”

Zongduozhu nodded, “Exactly,” he said, “Are you willing to enter our Tian Di Hui and become a brother?”

Wei Xiaobao happily said, “That’s wonderful!” In his mind, each and every one of Tian Di Hui members was a hero and a warrior, he had never imagined that he could become one of the Society’s brothers. He thought further, “Even Mao *Dage* is not a Tian Di Hui brother, could I be better than him?” He said, “I am afraid … I am afraid I am not good enough.” In that instant his eyes were shining as his heart was swayed between thoughts of personal gains and losses. He felt that it was an out-of-this-world undeserved good luck that most likely it was not real, perhaps *Zongduozhu* was only joking with him.

The *Zongduozhu* said, “It is possible for you to enter the Society. It’s just that our business is fighting the Qing, restoring the Ming, regarding our Han people’s rivers and mountains as heavy, and our very own lives as light. Moreover, the rules within the Society are very strict, if you violate it, your punishment will be very heavy. You must think it over very well.”

“I don’t need to think,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Whatever rule you have, I will abide by it. *Zongduozhu*, if you let me join the Society, I will die happy.”

The smile vanished from *Zongduozhu*’s face, he said grimly, “This is an extremely important matter, a matter of life and death, it’s not a child’s play.”

“Of course I know,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I heard people say that Tian Di Hui walks in the way of chivalry, justice and loyalty, its business is startling-the-sky and moving-the-earth kind of great undertakings, how can it be a child’s play?”

The *Zongduozhu* smiled and said, “It’s good that you know it. When you enter the Society, you must make 36 oaths and have to avoid ten strict prohibitions.” Speaking to this point, his

expression turned heavy. He said, “These prohibitions are not applicable to you since your age is still very young, but there is one: ‘toward my brothers, I must be faithful and true, I must not lie and swindle.’ This one prohibition, do you think you can accomplish?”

Wei Xiaobao was slightly startled, he said, “To you, *Zongduozhu*, naturally I won’t dare to lie. But toward the rest of the brothers, must I tell the truth all the time?”

“Minor matter you may not tell, important matter you must tell,” *Zongduozhu* said.

“That’s right,” Wei Xiaobao said, “But when I gamble with the Society’s brothers, can I or can’t I use tricks and cheat?”

The *Zongduozhu* had never thought he would ask this kind of question; showing a faint smile he said, “Although gambling is not a good deed, the Society’s rules do not have anything against it. However, if you cheat on them and when they find out they want to beat you, the Society does not forbid it either. Would you like to take a beating and get the worst of it?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “They won’t know. Actually, I don’t need to cheat; my confidence in winning is nine out of ten.”

Tian Di Hui’s members were Jianghu warriors; gambling and drinking were their second nature, nobody ever consider it wrong. *Zongduozhu* no longer paid him any attention. After staring at him for a while, he said, “Are you willing to do obeisance and take me as your master?”

Wei Xiaobao was ecstatic, immediately he threw himself in front of him and kowtowed repeatedly, while calling, "Shifu!"

This time the *Zongduozhu* did not help him up; after Wei Xiaobao had kowtowed a dozen times, he said, "It's enough!" Wei Xiaobao happily stood up. The *Zongduozhu* said, "I am surnamed Chen, called Jinnan. This three-character name 'Chen

Jinnan' is what I use in Jianghu. Since you have become my disciple, you must know your Shifu's real name. My original name is Chen Yonghua, 'yong' from 'yong yuan' [forever/eternal], and 'Hua' from 'zhong hua' [China]." When speaking about his real name, he lowered his voice.

"Disciple will firmly keep it in my heart, I won't dare to reveal it," Wei Xiaobao said.

Chen Jinnan looked at him carefully for half a day, he said slowly, "You and I are master and disciple now, we should not conceal anything from each other. Let me tell you frankly: your glib tongue, your craftiness and your excessive cheating is completely unsuited to your master's disposition; I do not like it at all. Therefore, the reason I accepted you as my disciple is out of consideration of our Society's major mission."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Later on disciple will change."

"Changing rivers and mountains is easy, changing a man's character is much harder," Chen Jinnan said, "You won't change much. You are still very young, your temper is rather unstable, so it's not that bad. In the future you must always remember my words. I always treat my disciples with strict discipline, if you violate our Society's rules, scheming against anything upright, break the law and commit crimes, your master will take your life. It is as easy as turning my hand, and I will not show any mercy." To prove it, he reached out with his left hand. 'Crack!' he grabbed and broke a piece of wood from the corner of the table, and rubbed it between his hands. Wood splinters rained down on the floor.

Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue and did not pull it back for half a day. Presently, the delight in his heart was difficult to be chased away. He said with a laugh, "I am not going to do any bad thing. As soon as I commit an evil deed, Shifu will grab me on my head and rub it. Besides, I only need to do several bad things and Shifu, you won't have any disciple to whom you can

pass on your skill."

"No need to do several bad things, only one is enough," Chen Jinnan said, "Then you and I won't be master and disciple anymore."

"How about two things?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

With a straight face Chen Jinnan replied, "You must be more serious to me, less smooth talking. One bad thing is one bad thing; do you even need to haggle over it?"

"Yes!" Wei Xiaobao complied, but in his heart he said, "What if I do half a bad thing?"

"You are my fourth disciple," Chen Jinnan said, "And maybe my last one. Tian Di Hui business is arduous, I do not have time to take a disciple. Your three *Shixiong*, two died in battle against the Tatars, one died in service during the recovery of Guoxing and Guangfu, Taiwan; they all died as real men sacrificing their lives for the country. Your master's status in Wulin world is not low, my reputation is not shameful, you must not do anything that will cause me to lose face."

"Yes!" Wei Xiaobao said, "It's just that ... it's just that ..."

"It's just that what?" Chen Jinnan asked.

"Sometimes it was not me who want to lose face," Wei Xiaobao said, "But I ended up losing face anyway, I can't help it. For example, I could not beat others, so others caught me and closed me up inside a jujube barrel, and was pushed around like some merchandise. Shifu, you must not blame me."

Chen Jinnan frowned; he was angered, but was also amused. After heaving a deep sigh he said, "Perhaps accepting you as my disciple is the biggest blunder I've ever made in my entire life. But for the sake of heavy responsibility over the important matter of the world, I have to brave a risk. Xiaobao, our Society has another important matter at hand, in everything you must

listen to my instruction and do as I command, don't talk nonsense too much, then you will be all right."

"Yes!" Wei Xiaobao said.

Chen Jinnan noticed that he was going to speak but hesitated, so he asked, "What do you want to say?"

"When disciple talks," Wei Xiaobao started, "I only say something that makes sense to me, I don't want to talk nonsense at all. Yet you say that I talk nonsense, isn't that an unjust treatment?"

Chen Jinnan did not want to squabble with him, he said, "Then the less you talk the better," but in his heart he said, "I don't know how many heroes and warriors under the heavens are showing respect in front of me, they do not even dare to breathe too loudly, but this cunning, uncouth and weird urchin insists on having this much useless words." He stood up and walked toward the door. "Come with me," he said. Wei Xiaobao rushed to the door and lifted the door curtain to let Chen Jinnan go out, then he followed him to the main hall.

There were about twenty people sitting in the main hall, as soon as they saw their *Zongduozhu* come out, everybody stood at attention immediately. Chen Jinnan nodded, he walked toward the second chair at the head of the hall and sat down. Wei Xiaobao noticed that the chair in the middle was empty, and the chair above his Shifu's position was also empty; he was bewildered, "Could it be that *Zongduozhu* is not the highest position?" he mused, "How come there are two people above Shifu?"

Chen Jinnan said, "Brothers, I have received a young disciple today." Pointing to Wei Xiaobao he said, "It's him!"

The crowd stepped forward; cupping their fists and bowing, they said, "Congratulations *Zongduozhu*," and then they cupped their fists toward Wei Xiaobao and one after another

they offered their congratulations as well. Some of them appeared really happy, some looked greatly astonished, some looked like they did not believe it really happened.

Chen Jinnan ordered Wei Xiaobao, "Go greet all *Bobo*, *Shushu*[86]." Wei Xiaobao then went to kowtow to everybody. Standing on the side, Li Lishi introduced, "This is Lotus Flower Hall's *Xiangzhu*, Cai Dezhong, Cai *Bobo*." "This is Great Obedience Hall's *Xiangzhu*, Fang Dahong, Fang *Bobo*." "This is Latter Family Hall's *Xiangzhu*, Ma Chaoxing, Ma *Bobo*."

Wei Xiaobao kowtowed in front of these *Xiangzhu* one by one. Altogether there were nine *Xiangzhu* from nine Halls. Next he had to greet the people next in command of the various Halls. The nine *Xiangzhu* returned his kowtow by casual greeting, they said continually, "I don't dare, *Xiao Xiongdi* please rise." But unexpectedly other people did not received his kowtow; as soon as he was about to kneel down, they would reach out and stop him. Wei Xiaobao was quick, sometimes he already knelt down before the other side had time to stop; in this case, the other person would hastily kneel as well to return the propriety. Apparently they did not dare to assume the position as a senior.

There were more than twenty people in the hall, Wei Xiaobao could not remember everybody's name and duty, he only knew that each one of these people was a leading figure of the Tian Di Hui. He thought, "As soon as I bowed to *Zongduozhu* and become his disciple, everybody treated me as one of their own, they even told me their real name and capacity within the Society." In his heart he was very happy.

Chen Jinnan waited until Wei Xiaobao finished greeting the people, and then he said, "Brothers, after taking this young disciple, I also wish for him to enter the Tian Di Hui."

"Nothing's better than that," the crowd replied in chorus.

The Lotus Flower Hall's *Xiangzhu*, Cai Dezhong was an old

man with white hair and white beard. He said, "From the beginning, great teacher always produces brilliant student. The disciple of *Zongduozhu* must be a wise, brave, and all-around talented young hero. I believe that he will establish great merit in our Society."

The Latter Family Hall's *Xiangzhu*, Ma Chaoxing was a short and stout man, with sincere smile on his face; he said, "Today we meet *Xiao Xiongdi* of the Wei family, but I do not have anything as a first meeting gift. The one surnamed Ma has always a man of meticulous planning and careful accounting; let's do it this way: how about if Cai *Xiangzhu* and I become *Xiao Xiongdi*'s sponsor as he joins the Society, consider it as our first meeting gift. What does Cai *Xiong* thinks?"

Cai Dezhong laughed aloud and said, "Old Ma's careful accounting need not be mentioned, it is guaranteed to be a sound planning. This first meeting gift does not involve any money, count me in." Everybody chuckled and laughed.

Chen Jinnan said, "Two *Bobo* have enormous faces, and they are willing to be your sponsor. Quickly thank them."

"Yes!" Wei Xiaobao replied. He stepped forward and kowtowed to express his gratitude.

Chen Jinnan said, "According to our Society's rules, the good and bad words and actions of the brother entering the Society will be the great responsibility of the sponsor. This young disciple of mine is very sharp-witted; I am afraid with his quick-thinking head, he would not do the job abiding by the rules. Since Cai and Ma, two *Xiangzhu* are his sponsors, later on you will share some of my responsibility. If he ever do anything dishonorable, you must put your hands to discipline him, you must not be too polite."

Cai Dezhong said, "*Zongduozhu* is too modest. How can any disciple under *Zongduozhu*'s tutelage be a dishonorable

scholar?"

"I am not being too modest," Chen Jinnan replied, "Toward this child, I do not feel at ease; by helping me disciplining him, everybody is sharing my responsibility and taking some load off my mind."

Ma Chaoxing laughed and said, "Disciplining him, I do not dare, *Xiao Xiongdi* is young, if you have anything you are not clear, we all are brothers here, of course we will be frank and open-minded, so you won't have to be uptight."

Chen Jinnan nodded and said, "Let me thank you in advance."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "I haven't done anything wrong, but Shifu already worry that I will do bad things. Ah, right, he heard me on the trick I used to deal with the old turtle, he is afraid my old illness might flare-up and would treat him the same way. But the old turtle wanted to harm me, plus he was not my Shifu, so I poisoned his eyes blind. You are my real Shifu, you will teach me real skill, how can I fool with you? Yet you talk about it up front, everybody here will discipline me, then I won't be able to move at all."

He heard Chen Jinnan said, "Li *Xiongdi*, please set up a ceremonial hall, we will have a ceremony today to let Wei Xiaobao join our Society." Li Lishi complied and went out to prepare the ceremony. Chen Jinnan said, "According to the customs of the former days, whenever someone wanted to join our Society, the sponsor must examine and investigate his past history and present conducts, for at least half a year, at most one or two years. When everything has been verified, we then conduct the ceremony and have the person join the Society. However, Wei Xiaobao holds a governmental post in the Qing Palace, he is a very trusted-aide of the young Emperor, which will be very beneficial to our Society. We have to temporarily make an exception here, but not because he is my own disciple."

The people said, “We, brothers, understand.”

The Great Obedience Hall's *Xiangzhu*, Fang Dahong was a big and tall man, his black beard was long and shiny. With a loud and clear voice he said, “We can have such a trusted brother handling matters at the side of the Tatars Emperor, is indeed a Heaven’s blessing. The luck of the Tatars is numbered, the revival our Great Ming’s rivers and mountains is promising. It is called ‘knowing yourself and knowing the enemy, you will emerge victorious in every battle’. Who does not understand *Zongduozhu*’s intention?”

Wei Xiaobao mused, “So the reason you all treat me very well is to make me a spy by the Emperor’s side. Shall I do it, or shan’t I do it?” Thinking how well Kangxi had treated him, he could not help but feeling quite a bit of hesitation.

Cai Dezhong immediately explained briefly the history and rules of the Tian Di Hui to Wei Xiaobao. He said, “The founder of our Society was Koxinga[87], whose original surname was Zheng, his given name was Cheng at the top and Gong at the bottom. At that time Koxinga was the leader of militia, he attacked Jiangnan [South of Changjiang/Yangtze River] and besieged Jiangning [district, Jiangsu], but he failed within sight of success, and was forced to retreat, back to Taiwan. Accepting *Zongduozhu*’s recommendation, he founded our Tian Di Hui. At that time, our *Zongduozhu* was Koxinga’s military leader. Me and Fang *Xiongdi*, Ma *Xiongdi*, Hu *Xiongdi*, Li *Xiongdi*, as well as the Green Wood Hall’s Yin *Xiangzhu* and the others, were all military officers and soldiers under Koxinga.”

Wei Xiaobao knew that Koxinga was Zheng Chenggong, whom the Ming Dynasty Emperor bestowed the surname Zhu, therefore, the people addressed him deferentially as Guo Xing Ye. Zheng Chenggong had a resounding reputation in the Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian and Guanghzhou area. He passed

away during the first year of Kangxi’s reign. Since he died not too long ago, when mentioning his name, everybody’s tone was very respectful. Mao Shiba had also mentioned his name to Wei Xiaobao.

Cai Dezhong continued, “There were a lot of our soldiers remained in Jiangnan, unable to retreat to Taiwan. Some withdrew to Xiamen, a small part of our army actually; for this reason, *Zongduozhu* accepted Koxinga's order to remain in the Central Earth to establish the Tian Di Hui and get in touch with Koxinga's former subordinates. Everybody who had followed Koxinga in the attack of Jiangsu and Zhejiang automatically became Tian Di Hui member, without any need of neither sponsor nor the probation period. But if any outsider wanted to join the Society, we must thoroughly verify his background, to guard against any spy penetrating our organization."

Speaking to this point, he paused for a moment, then suddenly his expression brightened as he continued with his narrative, "To think that back then our army embarked from Taiwan, altogether we had one hundred and seventy thousand men: fifty thousand navy, fifty thousand cavalry, fifty thousand infantry, ten thousand supporting guerillas, and ten thousand 'ironmen soldiers', each one of them wearing full body armor and wielded long lance in their hands, specially designed to hack the legs of Tatars' horses, while the enemy's blade and arrows could not injure them. During the battle of Mount Yang Peng in Zhenjiang, *Zongduozhu* was in command of two thousand troops, we destroyed the Tatars' eighteen thousand soldiers. It was truly majestic, the aura of death filled the air. I was an officer in the eighth garrison under *Zongduozhu*'s flag, I led my troops to rush and kill the enemy, and I heard the Tatars soldiers cried out, 'Malu, malu! Qihu, qihu!'."

Listening to this story, Wei Xiaobao was radiant with delight. "What does that mean?" he asked.

Cai Dezhong said, "In Tatar’s tongue, 'Malu, malu' means 'Mama, Mama'. 'Qihu, qihu' means 'run away, run away!'." Everybody roared in laughter.

Ma Chaoxing said with a laugh, "When Cai *Xiangzhu* is telling the story of the capture of Zhenjiang and the big massacre of the Tatar troops, he is in such a high spirit that the story won't be finished in three days and three nights. As the sponsor, you need to explain our Society's rules to Wei *Xiongdi*, if you talk like that, even when Wei *Xiongdi*'s beard grew as long as yours, you won't be finished ..." Speaking to this point, he suddenly remembered that Wei Xiaobao was a little eunuch, how could he grow beard? Stealing a glance toward Wei Xiaobao, he saw that Wei Xiaobao was unconcerned, only then did he feel relieved.

At this moment Li Lishi was back, reporting that the ceremony hall was ready. Chen Jinnan led everybody toward the rear hall. Wei Xiaobao saw two memorial tablets set up on an board table. The one in the middle read 'The Son of Heaven of the Great Ming', the one next to it read 'Lord Yan Ping of the Great Ming, Marshall Zheng'. As sacrificial offering on the table were arranged a pig's head, a sheep's head, a chicken, and a fish, plus seven incense sticks. Everybody kneeled down together and did obeisance to the spirit table.

Cai Dezhong took a sheet of white paper from the table, with a loud and clear voice he read, "Heaven and earth is universal, recovering the Great Ming, exterminating the barbarians. We all live together and die together, imitating the ancient tale of Peach Garden, we all are brothers, with the surname Hong [great], given name Jinlan [sworn brother], become one family. We bow to the heaven as our father, and to the earth as our mother, the sun is our brother, the moon is our sister. We bow to five ancestors and the founder Wan Yunlong as the guardian spirits of the Hong family. We take the twenty-fifth day of the

seventh month of the year Jiayin[88], at the Chou hour [between 1-3 am] as our birth-date. Over the former two capitals and thirteen provinces, wholeheartedly as one body. Present imperial court is not imperial court, generals and marshals are not general and marshals, the hearts of the people waver, as we are called to restore the Ming Dynasty and eliminate the barbarians under the heavens. We all consider Chen Jinnan as our commander, we will go with him thru five lakes and four oceans, to be heroes and warriors. We burn incense and establish an oath, to obey and walk in the way of the Heaven, to recover the Ming Dynasty, to take revenge and erase humiliation. We smear our lips with the blood of a sacrifice and make an oath, may the deities come down and be our witness."

Finished reading, Cai Dezhong explained, "Wei *Xiongdi*, within these words there is a reference to the ancient tale of 'Tying Righteousness in the Peach Garden', do you know about it?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Liu, Guan and Zhang made an oath of brotherhood in the Peach Garden, they were not born in the same year and the same month, but were wishing that they would die in the same year and the same month."

"That's right," Cai Dezhong said, "Now that you have entered Tian Di Hui, everybody becomes brother. We and *Zongduozhu* are brothers, you bowed to him and enter his tutelage, everybody become your *Bobo* or *Shushu*. Consequently, you greeted us by kowtowing. But from now on, we are brothers, so you do not need to kowtow to us anymore."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied, but in his heart he mused, "That's great."

Cai Dezhong said, "Our Tian Di Hui is also called Hong Men[89]. 'Hong' is from Hongwu, the regnal name of Ming

Taizu[90]. Surname Hong, given name Jinlan means the brotherhood of the Hong Men. Our Hong Men was founded by Wan Yunlong. Wan Yunlong is another name for Koxinga. First, we brothers do not dare to casually mentioning Koxinga's real surname and given name; second, it will be inconvenient to us if the eagle claws hear his name too much. Therefore, among the brothers, we refer to Koxinga as Wan Yunlong. 'Wan' means 'thousands and tens of thousands people', 'Yunlong' means a dragon in the cloud. Thousands and tens of thousands people consider the Great Ming as the Son of Heaven, thereupon he strived to regain our beautiful rivers and mountains. Wei *Xiongdi*, this is our Society's secret, you must never mention it to an outsider friend. Even if Master Mao Shiba is your good friend, your good brother, you must not tell him this."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "I understand," he said, "Mao *Dage* wanted very much to join our Tian Di Hui, can we let him join the Society?"

Cai Dezhong said, "Someday Wei *Xiongdi* can be his sponsor. After our Society people investigate in detail, naturally he can be admitted." Cai Dezhong also said, "The twenty-fifth day of the seventh month at the Chou hour was the time when our Society was established. Our Society's five ancestors were the five marshals who sacrificed themselves for the just cause in Jiangning. The first one was surnamed Gan given name Hui. I remember when our large army attacked Jiangning, I commanded a garrison of troops, I received *Zongduozhu*'s order to set an ambush outside the Jiangning western city gate, the Tatars army …" When talking about the attack on Jiangning prefecture in the past, he waved his hands continuously, the more he talked, the farther away he was from the topic at hand.

Ma Chaoxing smiled and interrupted him, "Cai *Xiangzhu*, it won't be too late if we tell the story of the attack on Jiangning

prefecture slowly later.”

Cai Dezhong laughed; slapping his own forehead he said, “Right, right. Once I started on the past events, I can’t stop until the story is finished. Let me read the ‘Three-point Revolutionary Poem’ now. I read a line, you follow by reading one line.” He started reading immediately, “Three-point hidden revolutionary model, those who enter our Hong Men must not disclose. Fostering an acute potential from the feuding days, swearing to exterminate the Qing Dynasty clean in a single sweep.” Wei Xiaobao repeated his reading.

Cai Dezhong said, “The character ‘hong’ in our Hong Men actually came from our Han people’s ‘han’ character. Our Han people’s rivers and mountains being occupied by the Tatars, without land, the character ‘han’ (漢) minus the character ‘tu’ [earth] (土) becomes the character ‘hong’ (洪).” Presently he explained the thirty-six pledges, ten prohibitions and ten punishments, and twenty one rules so that Wei Xiaobao could understand. Major rules include loyalty and brotherhood, filial piety, harmonious relationship with fellow countrymen, fellow members and brothers of the family, helping each other in trials and tribulations, et cetera. For leaking classified information, implicating the brethrens, surrendering to the authority, raping and pillaging, bullying the weak and alone, breaking his promise, embezzling public funds and other offenses, light punishment would be cutting the ear and flogging, heavy punishment would be dismemberment into eight pieces, beheading and dividing the body.

Wei Xiaobao promised to strictly abide by all the rules, one by one, he vowed he would never dare to disobey, and this time he was wholehearted, making the oath without causing any mischief.

Ma Chaoxing fetched a large bowl of wine, with a needle he pricked his left-hand’s middle finger and let his blood dripped

into the bowl. Chen Jinnan and the others also pricked their fingers. Finally Wei Xiaobao did the same. Everyone drank a mouthful of blood wine, and the ceremony inducting Wei Xiaobao into the Society was over. Everybody shook his hand and embraced him, it was intimate and warm. Wei Xiaobao felt a warm sensation in his entire body, he felt that from this day onward, he would not be left alone anymore in this world.

Chen Jinnan said, "Altogether our Society has ten Halls, five front houses five halls, rear five houses five halls. Five front houses Lotus Flower Hall, Great Obedience Hall, Latter Family Hall, Greatest Unity Hall, Magnificent Transformation Hall. Five rear houses Green Wood Hall, Scarlet Fire Hall, Western Gold Hall, Mysterious Water Hall, Yellow Earth Hall. The *Xiangzhu* of nine halls are assembled here. Only Green Wood Hall's Yin *Xiangzhu* was killed the year before last, until now it has no *Xiangzhu*. Brothers of Green Wood Hall, you have repeatedly made an oath in front of Wan Yunlong *Dage* and Yin *Xiangzhu*'s memorial tablets that whoever killed Oboi and avenge Yin *Xiangzhu*, everybody will revere him as our Hall's *Xiangzhu*. Is it true that there is indeed such matter?"

"Absolutely," everyone answered, "Indeed there is such matter."

Chen Jinnan's penetrating gaze swept everybody's face from left to right, he said slowly, "I heard that for the purpose of setting up the new *Xiangzhu*, the brothers of the Green Wood Hall once have had some disagreement. Although everybody took the big picture into consideration, heavily upholding benevolence and righteousness, and thus did not harm the brotherhood, but if this matter is not properly decided, within the Green Wood Hall there will always be an enormous private concern for me to worry. Green Wood Hall is an important Hall in our Tian Di Hui; it oversees all prefectures, provinces and counties in Jiangnan and Jiangbei. For the past few years it

gradually expand its authority over Shandong and Hebei, and this time it has penetrated the city limit of Beijing. Whether Green Wood Hall's *Xiangzhu* is an able person or not, it corresponds directly to the rise and fall of our Society, and bear enormous responsibility toward the success of failure of the great undertaking of overthrowing the Qing. In the event that the brethrens in the Hall are in disagreement and fail to work together for a common purpose, this great undertaking cannot be achieved." After a short pause he continued by asking, "That treacherous bandit Oboi was killed by Wei Xiaobao, and Green Wood Hall brothers witness this with their own eyes, is this true?"

Almost together Li Lishi and Guan Anji replied, "It is." Li Lishi also said, "In front of Wan Yunlong *Dage*'s memorial tablet everybody has made an oath. Definitely we cannot say that it doesn't count. If we made an oath like a fart, in the future, what other oath can we make in front of Wan Yunlong *Dage*'s memorial tablet, what other hope do we have? Although Wei Xiaobao *Xiongdi* is young, I, Li Lishi, am willing to support him as our Hall's *Xiangzhu*."

Having Li Lishi stole the initiative, Guan Anji thought, "This child is *Zongduozhu*'s disciple, his status is definitely out of ordinary. Listening to how *Zongduozhu* said those words, it's obvious that he wanted this young disciple to be our Hall's *Xiangzhu*. Li *Lao'er* [Ol' Li the second] and I are vying for the *Xiangzhu* position, neither one of us is willing submit to the other, we might as well 'move apart on the beat'. He had already opened his mouth to curry favor with *Zongduozhu*, I can't lose to him, since that will make me appear I am harboring a selfish desire." Thereupon he said, "Li *Dage* is right, Wei *Xiongdi*'s sharp-wittedness surpasses others, under *Zongduozhu*'s instruction, someday he will be a young hero whose prestige will shake the Jianghu. Guan Anji is willing to support Wei Xiaobao *Xiongdi* as our Hall's *Xiangzhu*."

Wei Xiaobao sprang up from fright, waving his hands wildly, he shouted, “Can’t do, can’t do! This … this *Xiangzhu* [fragrant master] or *Chouzhu* [stinky master], I can’t do it!”

Chen Jinnan glowered at him, “What nonsense are you talking about?” he barked. Wei Xiaobao did not dare to open his mouth anymore.

Chen Jinnan said, “This child’s blade has killed Oboi, and that is an unalterable fact. We must abide by the oath we made in front of Wan Yunlong *Dage*’s memorial tablet, and have no choice but must let him be the Green Wood Hall’s *Xiangzhu*. It was because I must let him be the *Xiangzhu* that I accepted him as my disciple, not the other way around. I didn’t think of making him the *Xiangzhu* after I accepted him as my disciple. This child’s character is not good, perhaps he will give me several hundred headache in the future.”

Fang Dahong said, “*Zongduozhu* has taken a lot of trouble, we, brothers understand it. *Zongduozhu* is neither relative nor kin with Wei *Xiongdi*, today is the first time you meet each other. *Zongduozhu* is making an exception by looking upon him with special favor, naturally it is because you are giving thought of our Society’s important matter. Only … only … *Zongduozhu* does not need to worry. Our Society’s brethrens intermingled with Jianghu people, very few read books, which mouth does not use bad language and common saying? Wei *Xiongdi* is young, Li *Dage* and Guan Fuzi are willing to support him with all their might, I am sure there won’t be any catastrophic disaster.”

Chen Jinnan nodded and said, “Therefore, we let Wei Xiaobao to be the Green Wood Hall *Xiangzhu* because we have sworn an oath in front of Wan Yunlong *Dage*’s memorial tablet, which we cannot simply dismiss. But as long as he has been the *Xiangzhu* for a day, we can consider it done. If tomorrow he commits outrages, disturbing Green Wood Hall’s affairs, hindering our Society’s great undertaking in fighting the Qing and restoring

the Ming, we can immediately strip him from the *Xiangzhu* position without half a part of tolerance. Li *Dage*, Guan *Erge*, I am asking the two of you to attentively help him. If this child does anything improper, I want you to report to me in details, do not conceal anything." Li Lishi and Guan Anji bowed and complied.

Chen Jinnan turned around and kneeled before the memorial tablet; he picked three burning incense sticks from the censer and held it high with both hands. With a clear voice he said, "Subordinate Chen Jinnan swears before Wan Yunlong *Dage*'s memorial tablet: if subordinate Wei Xiaobao violates our Society's rules, or displays insufficient obedience to the rules, subordinate will immediately depose him from Green Wood Hall *Xiangzhu* duty, without showing even half a part of favoritism. We grant him the *Xiangzhu* position in compliance with our oath. The day we depose him of his position, is also in compliance with this oath. If subordinate Chen Jinnan does not abide by this oath, the spirit of Wan *Dage* in heaven will strike the top of my head with thunder, my body will be pulled apart to five sections by horses, I will die under the Tatars' eagle claws' hands." Finished saying that, he bowed several times with the incense sticks still in his hands, and then returning the sticks to the censer, he knocked his head on the floor several times.

Everyone spoke together in praise, "The way *Zongduozhu* handles this matter is for the common good above everything without regard for personal interests, no one among us does not accept this wholeheartedly."

In his heart, Wei Xiaobao said, "Just great! I still say that the real reason all of you want me to be some *Xiangzhu* or *Chouzhu* is just so that you can use me as a wooden plank to cross the river. After crossing, you'll tear the bridge apart. Today you grant me to be a *Xiangzhu* because you want to abide by your oath. Tomorrow you'll pick a quarrel and depose me so that

you'll still abide by your oath. At that time whether it would be Li *Dage* or Guan Fuzi, either one will be a logical choice for the new *Xiangzhu*." With a loud voice he said, "Shifu, I don't want to be the *Xiangzhu*!"

Chen Jinnan was startled. "What?" he asked.

"I can't do it, and I don't want to do it," Wei Xiaobao said.

"You can't do it, but you can learn it slowly," Chen Jinnan said, "I can teach you, Li and Guan two brothers have already promised to help you. Within Tian Di Hui, *Xiangzhu* position ranks very high, why don't you want to do it?"

Wei Xiaobao shook his head, "Today I become one, tomorrow you will depose me, then I will be humiliated instead. I don't want to be *Xiangzhu*, everything is very obscure. Once I take the office, everybody will look for bones in the egg; in less than half a day, I will fall from power and be extremely disgraced."

Chen Jinnan said, "There is no bone in the egg, even everybody is looking for it, they won't find any."

"The egg will become a chick," Wei Xiaobao said, "So there is bone in it. Even if there is none, when the people look, they would break my eggshell first, talk later, mixing the egg yolk and the egg white, then the egg will collapse." Everybody could not help but laugh.

Chen Jinnan said, "Do you think the way we Tian Di Hui handle matters is a child's play? As long as you do not do any evil deed, everybody will respect you as the Green Wood Hall's *Xiangzhu*, who will offend you? Even if they don't revere you, they will still respect you as my disciple."

Wei Xiaobao thought for a while, then he said, "Alright, let us talk it over clearly first. If in the future you don't want me to be the *Xiangzhu*, so be it: I won't be the *Xiangzhu*. But you must not randomly add accusation, beat me or curse me, or cut my ears or chop my head, or cut me apart into eight sections."

Chen Jinnan frowned. “You always love to bargain back and forth,” he said, “If you don’t do any misdeed, who will kill you? If the Tatars beat you or kill you, everybody will avenge you.” Pausing for a moment, he continued earnestly, “Xiaobao, real men dare to do what they dare to say, real men won’t pass on their responsibility to others. Since you already join our Tian Di Hui, you must summon up your courage and determination to strive to be the first, to rid common people of all evil. If you are always scheming for your own good, won’t it be a bad act of a hero or a warrior?”

When Wei Xiaobao heard the words ‘hero and warrior’, he remembered how the storyteller always mentioned those great heroes; the heroic spirit was awakened in his breast. He said, “That’s right, Shifu’s lesson is very true. If my head is chopped, at most it will give me a bowl size scar. Eighteen years later, a hero will appear.” This was the words the Jianghu men often said when they were being tied up on the execution ground. Although the way Wei Xiaobao used it was not very appropriate, he won the applause of everybody in the hall.

Chen Jinnan smiled and said, “Being a *Xiangzhu* is a very happy occasion, unlike being tied up on the execution ground ready to be beheaded. There are nine other *Xiangzhu* in here, every one of them is doing it happily. You should learn to copy their manner.”

Guan Anji walked over toward Wei Xiaobao; he cupped his fist and bowed, “Subordinate Guan Anji pays his respect to our Hall’s *Xiangzhu*,” he said.

Wei Xiaobao turned his head to Chen Jinnan. “What do I do?” he asked.

“Just return the propriety,” Chen Jinnan replied.

Wei Xiaobao cupped his fist to return the propriety. “Guan Fuzi, how are you?” he said.

Chen Jinnan smiled and said, "'Guan Fuzi' is the nickname with which the brothers usually call him. In day-to-day business, you may call him 'Guan Fuzi', but in formal setting, you should call him Guan *Erge*."

Wei Xiaobao corrected himself, "Guan *Erge*, how are you?"

This time Guan Anji stole the initiative from Li Lishi. Immediately he also stepped forward to pay his respect. One by one the nine other *Xiangzhu* stepped forward to congratulate Wei Xiaobao. Then everybody returned to the main hall, leaving *Zongduozhu* and the ten Halls' *Xiangzhu* to discuss official business.

Green Wood Hall was the chief among the five rear houses' Halls. Within the Tian Di Hui organization, it ranked number six. Wei Xiaobao was seated on the first chair on the right row. Scarlet Fire Hall and other Halls' *Xiangzhu*, some had white beard hanging down to their chests, were unexpectedly seated in lower-ranked seats. Li Lishi, Guan Anji, and the others retreated outside the hall, so there were only eleven men left: Chen Jinnan and the ten *Xiangzhu*, the first echelon of the Tian Di Hui organization.

Chen Jinnan pointed to the empty chair in the middle and said, "This is the Third Prince Zhu's seat." Pointing to the other empty chair next to it he said, "This is the Taiwan's Zheng *Wangye*'s seat. Zheng *Wangye* is Koxinga's son, nowadays he inherited the title Yanping *Junwang*[91]. When we, Tian Di Hui are having our meetings, although Third Prince Zhu and Zheng *Wangye* are not present, we always provide empty seats for them." This explanation was obviously for Wei Xiaobao's benefit. He then continued by saying, "Brothers, please report the situation in various provinces."

Within the five front houses, the head house Lotus Flower Hall was in charge of Fujian, the second house Great Obedience Hall

was in charge of Guangdong, the third house Latter Family Hall was in charge of Guangxi, the fourth house Greatest Unity Hall was in charge of Hunan and Hubei, the fifth house Magnificent Transformation Hall was in charge of Zhejiang. Within the five rear houses, the head house Green Wood Hall was in charge of Jiangsu, the second house Scarlet Fire Hall was in charge of Guizhou, the third house Western Gold Hall was in charge of Sichuan, the fourth house Mysterious Water was in charge of Yunnan, the fifth house Yellow Earth was in charge of Henan.

The Tian Di Hui was comprised of Koxinga's former subordinates, their main force was in Fujian, which was the reason the Lotus Flower Hall was the head house; its power was the strongest. Next would be the two provinces Guangdong and Guangxi, followed by the two 'lakes' Hunan and Hubei[92], and then Zhejiang, Jiangsu.

Presently Cai Dezhong was the first to report the Tian Di Hui's affair in Fujian, followed by Fang Dahong recounting the Guangdong's Society's affair. Wei Xiaobao listened for a while. First, he did not understand, second, he did not have the least bit of interest. At last he was simply hearing without really listening, in his heart he was thinking about gambling and having fun.

When it was the Green Wood Hall *Xiangzhu*'s turn to give report, Chen Jinnan said, "Originally Green Wood Hall was in charge of Jiangnan, Jiangning, and Suzhou, dealing with the Tatars in those regions. Afterwards Yin *Xiongdi* moved the fragrant hall to Jiangbei Xuzhou, progressively entered Shandong, Zhili, straight toward Tatars' capital. Only, it's a pity Yin *Xiongdi* lost his life in Oboi's hands. The strength of Green Wood Hall is greatly harmed." He paused for a moment, and then continued, "A few days ago several brothers courageously broke into Prince Kang's mansion, where by lucky coincidence Xiaobao's blade killed Oboi and thus avenged Yin *Xiongdi*'s great

enmity. This major attack by the Green Wood Hall may cause fear and trepidation in the Tatars' hearts. It's just that from now on naturally the Tatars will intensify their guard. Hereafter when we work, we must be doubly careful." Everybody voiced their agreement together.

After this, one after another the *Xiangzhu* of Scarlet Fire Hall and Western Gold Hall gave an account of the situation around Guizhou and Sichuan, two provinces. Listening to this, Wei Xiaobao could not refrain from yawning, so hastily he reached up to cover his mouth. When the Mysterious Water Hall's *Xiangzhu*, Lin Yongchao, bringing up the situation in Yunnan, his expression was aroused in indignation; he was cursing continually. It was only then that Wei Xiaobao's spirit was also aroused.

He heard him say, "That traitor Wu Sangui opposes us on every front. From last year all the way to this year, not even ten month yet, there are seventy nine brothers of the Society being killed by that b@stard. Damn that goat, *laozi* definitely cannot live under the same sky with that dog traitor. Our people have attempted to assassinate him several times, but this traitor to the Han has many able people by his side. Consecutively we tried three times, all have failed ..." He pointed his finger to his left arm, which was hanging on his shoulder, and said, "During the attempt last month, his granny, *laozi* broke my arm. This great traitor has done too many evil deeds. There will come a day when his entire family will be beheaded and chopped into mincemeat by our Tian Di Hui." As soon as the name 'Wu Sangui' was mentioned, everybody had his breast filled with indignation.

In Yangzhou, Wei Xiaobao had already heard people mentioning how Wu Sangui helped the Qing troops crossing the pass and seizing the Han people's land. The Tatars troops raped, killed and burned in Yangzhou, the main culprit, the main cause

of the disaster, was Wu Sangui. After helping the Qing Dynasty conquering China, he was granted the title Ping Xi Wang [King who pacify the West], with the right to guard Yunnan forever. Wei Xiaobao noticed that whenever people mentioning the name Wu Sangui, three characters, nobody did not clench his teeth and show hatred so deep into their bones. Therefore, when this Lin *Xiangzhu* open his mouth in swearing and cursing, Wei Xiaobao did not think it was strange.

As soon as Lin Yongchao started to curse, the other eight *Xiangzhu* also open their mouth in curses. These men were originally soldiers who for the last several years had mingled with Jianghu people, so they were accustomed to vulgar language. However, in front of *Zongduozhu*, with great effort they tried to restrain themselves. As soon as they started cursing, nobody tried to be polite. Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; as soon as he heard some cussing, he was like a fish enters the water; he could not stop his own mouth from hurling obscenities. Speaking about cussing, Wei Xiaobao's finesse were several degree above these nine *Xiangzhu*; a sentence by a sentence he beat around the bush, each sentence was malicious and mean, the nine *Xiangzhu* were only shouting curses in their anger, so that compared to Wei Xiaobao their deficiency was obvious.

Chen Jinnan waved his hand and said, "Enough, enough! Even if there are millions more people in the world cursing Wu Sangui, that scoundrel is still nicely holding his *Ping Xi Wang* position. Cursing will not kill him, assassination won't be effective either."

Great Transformation Hall's *Xiangzhu*, Li Shikai was short and slim, he was soft-spoken and neither did he curse too much. This time he spoke, "In subordinate's opinion, even if we launched a large-scale attack against Yunnan and killed Wu Sangui, it won't give us any big advantage over the general

situation. The imperial court would simply appoint another governor-general or inspector-general, the common people in Yunnan will not experience a change of fate. This traitor Wu Sangui has committed grave sin, if we kill him with one stab of a blade, it is rather too easy for him."

Chen Jinnan nodded. "These words make a lot of sense," he said, "I wonder what kind of wise opinion does Li *Xiongdi* have?"

"This is a matter of great importance," Li Shikai replied, "All of us must take our time in making a decision. Subordinate does not have any good idea, I will submit to *Zongduozhu*'s direction."

"'This is a matter of great importance, all of us must take our time in making a decision.'" Chen Jinnan repeated, "These words by Li *Xiongdi* is a wise opinion. There is a good common saying: one man's planning is short, two men's planning is long. We are ten people, no, eleven people; if we think calmly, we will come up with an even better idea. By killing Wu Sangui, not only we will avenge Tian Di Hui brothers who were killed by him, we will also avenge millions of our compatriot Han people under the heavens. I have pondered over this matter for a long time. That traitor Wu Sangui is deep rooted in Yunnan, his power is enormous; based on one Society, Tian Di Hui's power alone, I am afraid we cannot topple him down."

Lin Yongchao loudly said, “Even if we have to be cut in pieces, we must fight to topple him down.”

Cai Dezhong said, “You have already fought, Wu Sangui has not been toppled down, but you had your arm broken.”

Lin Yongchao angrily said, “Are you mocking me of my incompetence?”

Cai Dezhong realized he had made an indiscreet remark. “I was only joking,” he said with a laugh, “Lin *Xiongdi*, please do

not be angry.”

Seeing Lin Yongchao was still seething with anger, with a gentle voice Chen Jinnan consoled him, “Lin *Xiongdi*, killing Wu Sangui is the important matter every hero and warrior in the world is dreaming of, how can we let worthy brother Lin and the Mysterious Water Hall bear this heavy burden alone? Even if Tian Di Hui’s several tens of thousands brothers join hands with one heart, we may not necessarily be able to move his hand.”

“*Zongduozhu* is right,” Lin Yongchao said, only then did his anger subside.

Chen Jinnan said, “In my opinion, if we want to accomplish this important matter, we must make contact with all schools, sects, clans and societies in Jianghu, to plan together on a large scale. That traitor Wu Sangui have several tens of thousands elite troops in Yunnan; the brave soldiers and fierce generals under his banners are no small matter. If we only want to kill him, it might not be an extremely difficult matter, but to kill his entire household, to wipe away the traitors to the Han, the wicked thieves, big and small, his subordinates who help him committing the oppression[93], is entirely beyond our Tian Di Hui’s power to accomplish.”

Lin Yongchao slapped his thigh and shouted, “Exactly, exactly! Our Tian Di Hui’s brothers who had been killed by Wu Sangui are too many, if we only kill that traitor, how can his life make up for theirs?”

Thinking about killing Wu Sangui, along with his household and the evil traitors working for him, everybody was very excited. But not too long afterwards, they all looked at each other in blank dismay, while in their hearts they thought, “This is indeed very difficult.”

Cai Dezhong said, “Shaolin and Wudang two sects have many men and great force, they also have high level of martial art

skill, we must make contact with them."

The Yellow Earth *Xiangzhu* Yao Bida said doubtfully, "The Shaolin Temple Abbot, Hui Cong *Dashi*[94] indeed has an extremely high prestige in the Wulin world, but he has always been experienced and knowledgeable, he won't agree to oppose the authority. These last several years, he even passed a new rule, so that it won't be easy even for secular disciples to leave the Temple and go down the mountain, for fear that they would stir up trouble and bring disaster to the Temple. If we want to make contact with Shaolin, I am afraid we will be met with many difficulties."

The Greatest Unity Hall's *Xiangzhu*, who was in charge of the Hunan and Hubei territory, Hu Dedi nodded and said, "Wudang Pai is more or less the same. The Abbot of Zhenwu Guan[95], Taoist Yun Yan and his *Shixiong* Taoist Yun He have been at odds with each other for a long time, the two of them are completely locked in constant strife, they always try to find flaws in each other's disciples. Asking them to take a risk like killing Wu Sangui, I am afraid … I am afraid …" He did not continue, but it was clear to everybody that most probably Yun Yan and Yun He would not be willing to do.

Lin Yongchao said, "If we cannot reach Shaolin and Wudang, we have no other choice but to deal with it with our own strength."

"No need to be impatient," Chen Jinnan said, "Shaolin and Wudang are not the only schools in Wulin."

One by one they offered their suggestions. Some said that perhaps Emei would be willing to join, some other said that since there were many martial experts from the Beggar Clan joined the Tian Di Hui, certainly they would be willing to collaborate with Tian Di Hui in putting this big traitor to China to death.

After listening for the discussion for quite some time, Chen Jinnan said, "If not ninety percent sure, we must never ever propose this matter to others."

"Naturally," Fang Dahong replied, "If people are unwilling to do it, it doesn't count to have their nose rubbed in the dirt, plus it will damage our Tian Di Hui's face."

"Losing face is not important," Chen Jinnan said, "But if the information leaks out, that thief Wu Sangui will be more vigilant, our job will be a lot thornier."

Li Shikai said, "To maintain the steadiness of our purpose, whoever wants to propose to any school, sect, clan or society must have *Zongduozhu*'s approval first, other people must not casually make any decision."

"It ought to be so," the people all replied. They continued their discussion for some time.

Chen Jinnan said, "This time we are not able to draft a definite plan. In three months, everybody will gather again in Changsha, Hunan. Xiaobao, you must return to the Palace. In Green Wood Hall's affairs, let Li Lishi and Guan Anji act on your behalf for the time being. You don't have to attend the meeting in Changsha."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied, but in his heart he said, "Doesn't this clearly show 'tear down the bridge after crossing the river'?"

After all other *Xiangzhu* had been dismissed, Chen Jinnan pulled Wei Xiaobao's hand back to the side room. He said, "On Heavenly Bridge [Tianqiao] in Beijing there is an old man selling medicinal paste[96] by the surname of Xu. On the other medicinal plaster sellers' banners, the plaster is black in color, but on this Old Xu's banner, the plaster is half red half blue. If you want to contact me, just go to the Heavenly Bridge and find

Old Xu. Ask him, 'Do you have plaster for virulent clear poison, a plaster that will restore clarity to blind eyes, a plaster against clear poison to restore clarity[97]?' He would reply, 'I do, but the price is too expensive, I want three *taels* of gold and three *taels* of silver.' You say, 'Will you sell it for five *taels* of gold and five *taels* of silver?' Then he will know who you are."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly amused, he laughed and said, "Others offer to sell it to you for three *taels*, but you make a counter-offer of five *taels*; where in the world have you ever heard of such matter?"

Chen Jinnan smiled and replied, "This is to guard against an accident in case someone really want to buy 'plaster against clear poison to restore clarity'. As soon as he hears your counter offer of five *taels* of gold and five *taels* of silver, he would ask, 'Why is the price so expensive?' You reply, 'Not expensive, not expensive; as long as it can really restore clarity, even if I have to work like an ox or a horse for you, it is not expensive at all.' He would then say, 'The earth shakes high mound, a mountain creek is elegant for all eternity.' You say, 'The gate faces the ocean, the three rivers and the water will flow for ten thousand years.' He would ask, "Which hall is located by the red flower pavilion?' You reply, 'The Green Wood Hall.' He would ask, 'How many fragrant incense sticks are burning in the hall?' You say, 'Five fragrant incense sticks!' Five burning fragrant incense sticks indicate that you are the *Xiangzhu*. He is a brother of our Society's Green Wood Hall, he is your subordinate. Whatever you want, you can tell him to do it for you."

Wei Xiaobao committed everything into his heart. Chen Jinnan repeated the dialog two more times, and told Wei Xiaobao to practice one time through until not a single word was wrong. Chen Jinnan also said, "Although this Old Xu is your subordinate, his martial art skill is very profound. You must not

be rude toward him." Wei Xiaobao gave him his promise.

"Xiaobao," Chen Jinnan said, "We created havoc in Prince Kang's mansion, the Tatars will definitely send spies riding toward four directions; we can't stay long in here. When you are back at the Palace today, tell the people there that you were being captured by a powerful group of people, during the night, you use trick to kill a powerful man guarding you, and you escape and return to the Palace. If someone wants you to lead the troops to make some arrests, you may lead the troops here. We will bury that traitor Oboi's severed head in the vegetable garden at the back. Take the troops there and have them dig; nobody will suspect anything."

"Apparently everybody will have left by then, haven't they?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Chen Jinnan said, "As soon as you leave, everybody will disperse, you don't have to worry. Three days later, I am coming to Beijing to teach you martial art. Go to the Fresh Water Well Alley in the Dongcheng district of central Beijing. There will be a brother waiting for you at the mouth of the alley, he will take you to see me."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Chen Jinnan gently stroked Wei Xiaobao's head, "You may go now!" he gently said.

Wei Xiaobao immediately went in to see Mao Shiba to take his leave. Mao Shiba did not know that he had joined the Tian Di Hui and had become a *Xiangzhu*, he asked Wei Xiaobao all kinds of question, showing his utmost concerned. Wei Xiaobao did not expose anything. By this time the dagger and his other personal belongings had been returned. Chen Jinnan asked someone to prepare a horse for Wei Xiaobao to ride, and then he personally walked him out of the gate. Li Lishi, Guan Anji, Priest Xuanzhen and other Green Wood Hall brothers sent him

off for three *li*. Wei Xiaobao asked for direction until he understood clearly, then urging his horse, he galloped toward Beijing. By the time he entered the Palace, it was already evening; he went straight to kowtow to the Emperor.

Kangxi already heard the news that in the prison cell at Prince Kang's mansion, Oboi was killed by Wei Xiaobao; he assumed that Wei Xiaobao must have been captured by Oboi's cronies, so most probably he was more unfortunate than being fortunate. As the matter developed, the Qing court immediately made arrest everywhere, seizing the remnants of Oboi's defeated clique to be interrogated via torture. They had apprehended not a few of people, but could not find any clue.

Kangxi was greatly frustrated and anxious; suddenly hearing Wei Xiaobao had returned, he was pleasantly surprised. Hurriedly he granted an audience, and as soon as he saw him entering the study room, he hastily asked, "Xiao Guizi, you ... how did you escape?"

Along the way, Wei Xiaobao had already prepared a major deception, for the part where he was seized by a powerful man and how he was transported away inside a jujube barrel he did not need to lie. Next, he narrated how the clique of traitors, many of them, set up a memorial tablet and prepared to offer sacrifices. But because they were waiting for the arrival of a leading figure, temporarily they did not kill him, but bound him inside a dark room instead. And then how in the middle of the night he rubbed and broke the ropes binding his hands, and how he killed the guard and escaped out; how he hid in the underbrush to evade the pursuing riders, how he stole a horse and returned via a roundabout route. He narrated the story by adding sound effect and acting the part, it was extremely vivid.

Kangxi was listening with keen interest, he repeatedly patted Wei Xiaobao’s shoulder and praised, “Xiao Guizi, you are good.” He also said, “You must be going through a lot of trouble.”

"Your Majesty," Wei Xiaobao said, "This clique of traitors, Oboi's followers, its power is really not small. When your servant escaped, I memorized the route well; how about if we immediately send troops to capture them?"

"Wonderful!" Kangxi replied happily, "Quickly tell Songgotu to take three thousand cavalry and follow you to catch the criminals." Wei Xiaobao withdrew and ordered someone to notify Songgotu.

When Songgotu heard that Xiao Guizi was kidnapped by Oboi's subordinates, he thought that he had lost a major helper in the Palace, and thus he was anxious. Although he managed to embezzle four hundred fifty thousand *taels* of silver, when all is said and done, this lost was even greater than the gain. When he suddenly heard that Xiao Guizi had escaped and returned to the Palace, immediately his spirit rose. Hastily assembling the troops, he followed Wei Xiaobao to arrest the remainders of Oboi's party.

They were about halfway when Prince Kang's messenger caught up with them to deliver Wei Xiaobao's Jade Flower buckskin horse. Wei Xiaobao mounted the colt. He glanced left and right, feeling unusually pleased with himself.

Upon reaching Tian Di Hui's gathering place, naturally they did not see any shadow. Songgotu ordered his men to search around. Soon they dug out Oboi's severed head and headless body in the vegetable garden; they also found a memorial tablet with these words inscribed on it: 'Memorial Tablet of the Great Qing Junior Protector, Number One Warrior, Official Oboi', and several rolls of elegiac couplet offering condolences to Oboi. Naturally it was Chen Jinnan who deliberately left these things behind.

Wei Xiaobao and Songgotu returned to Beijing, and presented the memorial tablet and elegiac couplets to Kangxi. Wei Xiaobao's expression looked like he had just set up a great

merit. Kangxi made an effort to say several sentences of praise and encouragement, then he gave an order to have Oboi's body and head buried properly. He also ordered the two of them to continue the investigation carefully. Wei Xiaobao repeatedly complied with his mouth, his face showed devotion and diligence, but in his belly he was laughing.

Chapter 9

Polishing and refining a rather slanted wall to its completion does not need the intensity that will break a *qin* into pieces.

(Translated by Foxs)

Feng Jizhong flew up and then from the air he struck down. Priest Xuanzhen leaned sideways to evade. Feng Jizhong swiftly moved in front of Xuanzhen's body; with his left leg he swept across to the right, with his right arm he swept across to the left. It was exactly the Mu Family's 'sweeping away a thousand army'.

After three days, Wei Xiaobao reported to Kangxi that he wanted to go out to investigate the remnants of Oboi's defeated clique. Going alone, he headed toward the Fresh Water Well Alley on Dongcheng district of central Beijing. There was a wonton seller, with a pair of wonton pots on a carrying pole, stopping at about a dozen *zhang* away from the mouth of the alley. When the wonton seller saw Wei Xiaobao, he picked up the long bamboo wonton chopsticks and tapped it against the bamboo tube in which he stored his money. 'Tap, tap, tap', three times, paused, then 'tap, tap', twice, then 'tap, tap, tap', three times again. About several *zhang* away, there was a man with shoulder pole, selling blue radish. The man used the knife, with which he cut the radish, to tap his shoulder pole with the same rhythm.

Wei Xiaobao guessed that this must be Tian Di Hui's method of transmitting news, so he followed a hawker selling candied fruits dipped in sugar syrup on bamboo skewers entering the alley. They arrived in front of a jet black main gate of a building. There were three men squatting at the door, whitewashing the wall using lime. Seeing Wei Xiaobao, one of them nodded, then tapped the wall several times using the lime brush, the black door immediately opened. Wei Xiaobao walked into a courtyard and entered the main hall, and saw Chen Jinnan had already sat in the hall; immediately he rushed forward and kowtowed.

Chen Jinnan was very delighted, he said, "You are early; nothing's better than that. Originally I wanted to stay for several days to teach you martial art, but I received news yesterday that Fujian has an important matter that needs my immediate attention. This time I can only stay for a day."

In his heart, Wei Xiaobao was happy, "Since you don't have time to teach me martial art, when in the future my training is not good, that will be your problem, you can't blame me." But his face showed disappointment.

Chen Jinnan took a rather thin book from his bosom and said, "This is our school's basic instruction on internal energy cultivation. You must study hard every day." Opening the book, he showed every page had pictures of human figure training the internal energy, along with the mnemonic, which he taught to Wei Xiaobao. For the time being Wei Xiaobao was not able to comprehend completely, he merely memorized it carefully.

Chen Jinnan spent more than four hours explaining the entire set of internal energy cultivation technique; he said, "Our school's martial art puts upright heart and good faith first. You, on the other hand, has a heart like a frisky monkey and a mind like a cantering horse, so you are incompatible with our school martial art, training will be doubly difficult for you; you must especially diligent if you want to succeed. Just remember this: if during training your mind is agitated, your head dizzy and your eyes blur, you must stop immediately. You must calm down first, put your distracting thoughts in order, then you practice from the beginning again, otherwise you'll face a significant danger."

Wei Xiaobao gave his promise. He received the book and put it inside his pocket. Chen Jinnan asked in details the martial art Hai Tianfu taught him. After Wei Xiaobao demonstrating and explaining everything one by one, Chen Jinnan muttered to himself, "You are aware early on that these martial art skills are bogus, it will be completely useless against a real enemy. I just feel strange, why did Tatar Empress Dowager also teach bogus martial art skill to the Tatar young Emperor?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "The old wh0re is not the young emperor’s biological mother, moreover … moreover the old wh0re is not a good person, she is a greatly evil person.” He thought that the implication of the old wh0re killing the young emperor’s mother and so on would be too great, so he could not tell his Shifu about it; besides, this matter had nothing to do with his Shifu.

Chen Jinnan nodded. Then he inquired about Hai Tianfu’s

character and behavior; he felt that this old eunuch's conduct and deeds were enshrouded in secrecy. Wei Xiaobao talked for a while, suddenly 'Wah!' he broke into a bawl.

"Xiaobao," Chen Jinnan gently asked, "What is it?"

Sobbing and sniffling, Wei Xiaobao told him about how Hai Tianfu secretly put poison in the soup. Finally he sobbed and said, "Shifu, the poison is incurable. After I am dead, the Green Wood Hall brothers won't be able to use the old way again."

"What old way?" Chen Jinnan asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Oboi killed Yin *Xiangzhu*, and I killed Oboi, so everybody wanted me to be the Green Wood Hall's *Xiangzhu*. The old turtle Hai killed Wei *Xiangzhu*, the old wh0re killed the old turtle Hai, but everybody cannot ask the old wh0re to be the Green Wood Hall's *Xiangzhu*."

Chen Jinnan burst out laughing; attentively he checked Wei Xiaobao's pulse and asked detailed questions about the pain on his lower abdomen. He reached out toward Wei Xiaobao's lower abdomen and using his finger he pressed, sometime lightly, another time heavily, on the acupoints all around his lower abdomen. After muttering irresolutely to himself for half a day, he said, "Don't be afraid! Maybe Hai Tianfu's poison does not have any antidote in the world, but I can force the poison out using my internal energy."

Wei Xiaobao was delighted, he repeatedly said, "Thank you very much Shifu!"

Chen Jinnan took him inside and had him lying on the bed. With his left hand he pressed the *Shan Zhong* acupoint on the pit of Wei Xiaobao's stomach, with his right hand he pressed the *Da Zhui*[98] acupoint on his back. After a while, Wei Xiaobao felt two streams of heat slowly flowed downward and around his stomach; his body felt an unspeakable comfort, he became

drowsy and fell asleep. In his blurry state, he suddenly felt an unspeakable pain in his tummy. “Aiyo!” he cried out, and woke up. “Shifu!” he shouted, “I … I want to poop!”

Chen Jinnan led him out to the door of the latrine. Wei Xiaobao had just untied his pants when the excrement spurted straight out, the stench was really unbearable, followed by a lot of vomiting from his mouth.

Wei Xiaobao returned to his bedroom, his limbs felt weak and painful, he was barely able to stand up. Chen Jinnan smiled and said, “Good! Eighty, ninety percent of the poison in your system is out, the remaining is not dangerous anymore. Here I have twelve efficacious detoxifier pills; take it for twelve days, the remaining poison will be driven off completely from your body.” From his pocket he took out a small porcelain bottle and handed it over to Wei Xiaobao.

Wei Xiaobao received it with deep gratitude in his heart. “Shifu,” he said, “Do you still have some more pills for yourself? You give all to me, if you get poisoned …”

With a faint smile Chen Jinnan said, “If others think of poisoning me, it’s not going to be easy.”

The sky darkened, it was evening. Chen Jinnan told the servant to serve dinner, which he ate with Wei Xiaobao. Seeing they were only having four ordinary dishes, Wei Xiaobao thought, “Shifu is a great hero, but the way he eats is so casual.” Since he knew the poison inside his body had been repelled, his heart was free from worry; he ate and served his Shifu with smile on his face, he looked genuinely happy.

After dinner, Wei Xiaobao poured tea for his Shifu. Chen Jinnan took several sips, and then said, “Xiaobao, my wish for you is that you will be a good child. As soon as I have free time, I am coming back to Beijing to teach you martial art.”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao replied.

“Alright,” Chen Jinnan said, “You’d better return to the Palace now. The Tatars are very sly, although you are very smart, after all, you are very young; you must be very careful in everything.”

“Shifu,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I feel very stifled living in the Palace, when can I go roaming the Jianghu with you?”

Chen Jinnan stared at his face and said, “You must endure patiently for several more years, and set up several great merits for our Society. By that time … in several more years your voice will change, your facial hair will grow, then you can’t pretend to be an eunuch anymore. By that time you can get out of the Palace.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “Whether I do good deeds or bad deeds in the Palace, none of you will know. If you are thinking of deposing me of the *Xiangzhu* position, it’s not going to be easy. In the future I will be a grown up, my martial art will have been trained well, perhaps by then you won’t want to depose me.” Thinking hither, he was happy. “Yes, yes,” he said, “Shifu, I am leaving.”

Chen Jinnan stood up; holding Wei Xiaobao’s hand he said, “Xiaobao, the Tatars have the situation under control, this great undertaking of fighting the Qing restoring the Ming is very difficult. In the Palace, you are in the face of danger at all times. You are such a young child, you haven’t learned any real ability, actually, I am quite worried over you. It’s just that since we already entered Tian Di Hui, ourselves do not belong to us anymore; as long as it is beneficial to our movement of fighting the Qing restoring the Ming, even if we fully aware there is a pit in front of us, we must still jump in. It’s a pity … it’s a pity that you cannot stay by my side often, so I can teach you well. I only hope that in the future you can spend more time with me. Right now our Society’s brethrens respect you because they are looking at my face, but I cannot look after you for the rest of

your life. In the future, whether people will respect you, whether they will look up at you, it all depends on you."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Losing my face is not important, but I must not disgrace Shifu."

Chen Jinnan shook his head, "You must never lose your face," he said.

"Yes, yes," Wei Xiaobao replied, "I lose Xiao Guizi's face is alright. Xiao Guizi is a Tatar eunuch, so if we lose Xiao Guizi's face, we are losing a Tatar's face; then we are fighting the Qing restoring the Ming." Chen Jinnan heaved a deep sigh; in all honesty he did not know how he was going to teach Wei Xiaobao.

Wei Xiaobao returned to the Palace and went back to his room. Songgotu had handed him several dozens of banknotes, altogether there were four hundred sixty six thousand five hundred *taels*. Wei Xiaobao looked carefully at these bank notes over and over, in his heart he was very happy. What happened was: in order to curry Wei Xiaobao's favor, Songgotu had originally promised him four hundred fifty thousand *taels*; after Oboi's property was sold, the price was actually higher than the initial estimate by more than ten thousand *taels.*

Wei Xiaobao looked at the banknotes for quite a while before putting them away. And then fetching out the martial art manual Chen Jinnan gave him, he followed the secret passed on to him by sitting cross-legged and started to practice. When looking at the print of numbers in silver and vermillion ink on the banknotes, his expression was beaming and buoyant, but as soon as he looked at the martial art theory, instantly his interest waned, much less from among hundreds of characters written on the book, he did not recognize even a single one. After practicing for less than an hour he felt his mind blurry and his eyes tired; he dropped onto his bed and fell asleep immediately.

When he woke up the next morning, he went straight to the Upper Study Room to wait on the Emperor. Upon returning to his room, he practiced again; but before long he unexpectedly fell asleep again. The martial art Chen Jinnan taught him was extremely not easy to learn; without an enormous willpower, it would be hard for him to pass the first obstacle. Wei Xiaobao was intelligent and astute, but he lacked the willpower to do anything. As soon as he sat and started to practice, he felt the difficulty was incomparable; he became drowsy and wanted to sleep.

By the time he awoke, it was already in the middle of the night. He thought, “Shifu told me to practice, but his martial art is extremely tedious. But if I goof off and do not practice, next time I see Shifu and he ask me, he would find out I do not make the least bit of progress, and then he would be greatly dissatisfied. Perhaps he would even strip me of my Green Wood Hall *Xiangzhu* position.”

He got up, picked up the book and looked again, then sat cross-legged and practiced according to the theory. Before long, his eyes grew very heavy again; he was unable to resist his desire to sleep. “They have planned to tear down the bridge after crossing the river anyway,” he thought, “It doesn’t matter if I am a great bridge of blue stone slab, or a rotten wood log bridge, they will still tear it apart. It doesn’t matter if I practice martial art or not.” Since he had found an excuse not to train, his heart was relieved; hence he dropped his head and fell asleep, snoring loudly.

Since he did not have to practice martial art, he passed his days freely and leisurely. When the twelve pills were gone, the pain in his lower abdomen had also disappeared. During the day he would wait on Kangxi at the Upper Study Room for several hours, and whenever he was free, he would throw dice with Wen brothers and the others. Presently he was a rich and

powerful person with wealth of several hundred thousand *taels*, hence he did not need to cheat in throwing dice; however, gambling against these ‘cattle’, he would feel an unspeakable discomfort if he did not cheat. Naturally Wen brothers, Ping Wei, Lao Wu, and the others owed him more and more money. Lucky for them that Wei Xiaobao had never demanded payment, plus Hai Tianfu was no longer alive, so that even though Wen brothers and the others were heavily in debt, they were not too worried.

As for the business of the Catering Department, he had his subordinate eunuchs doing the work. Each month on the second and sixteenth days the eunuch manager would deliver four hundred *taels* to Wei Xiaobao’s room. At this time Songgotu had already distributed several tens of thousands *taels* on Wei Xiaobao’s behalf to the imperial concubines, eunuchs with authority, and the imperial bodyguards all over the Palace. Wei Xiaobao’s face, as well as the fact that he was Kangxi’s favorite, was already well-known. In the last several months, he had quite a reputation within the Palace, everybody who met him would smile and greet him.

The autumn passed, the winter came, each day the weather was growing colder. This day Wei Xiaobao went down from the Upper Study Room, when he suddenly remembered, “Shifu says that if I have something, I should go to the Heavenly Bridge and contact the plaster seller, Old Xu. Although I don’t have anything in particular, there is no harm in exchanging those secret dialogue, those 'The earth shakes high mound, a mountain creek is elegant for all eternity, the gate faces the ocean, the three rivers and the water will flow for ten thousand years'; it would be fun. Hey, you want three *taels* of gold and three *taels* of silver for this plaster, that’s too expensive! Will you sell it for five *taels* of gold and five *taels* of silver? Ha ha, ha ha …!”

He went out of the Palace gate and wandered around along the streets. Passing in front of a teahouse, he saw a storyteller was doing his presentation, so he strolled in and sat down to enjoy a pot of tea. The storyteller was narrating the ‘Heroic Deed Commentaries’, the part where Zhu Yuanzhang was having the great battle on Lake Poyang against Chen Youliang; how Zhou Dian carried Zhu Yuanzhang to another boat, how Chen Youliang’s battleship bombarded the ship Zhu Yuanzhang was originally riding and blew it up. Wei Xiaobao was very familiar with this story since he had heard it before, plus the storyteller’s rendition was not very good. Nevertheless, once he sat down, he was listening to the story for the most part of an hour. Strolling to the east and visiting the west, it was already dark, he did not get to visit the Heavenly Bridge that day.

The second day and the third day he did not go out at all. Every night just before bed he would promise himself, that the next day he would see that Old Xu. However, he would spend the next day either gambling, listening to the storytellers, or just wandering around the street recklessly wasting his money. These days he simply lived his free and unrestrained, merry life in the Palace. Being a court eunuch was definitely a lot more agreeable to him than being a Tian Di Hui’s *Xiangzhu* or *Chouzhu*. He knew this thought was utterly lack of prospect, so he did not dare to indulge in this thought too often. Occasionally he would remember but he always consoled himself, “I do not have anything to report anyway, why should I see the Old Xu? If the secret leaks out, my losing my little life is unimportant, but Tian Di Hui’s great undertaking will be jeopardized.” And so more than a month was passed this way.

This day Wei Xiaobao went to the teahouse to listen to the ‘Heroic Deed Commentaries’ again. The teahouse proprietor knew he was a court eunuch from the Palace, and he always left quite a lot of tips, so the proprietor always reserved the best seat for him, and served him the most fragrant tea. By this

time Wei Xiaobao was already used to have people fawning on him; although the teahouse proprietor's special treatment was not strange to him, the flattering and respectful words were still quite enjoyable to hear.

The storyteller on the stage was narrating the story of the great general Xu Da went into war and completely routed the Tatars troops that they rush back to Mongolia. It was the national capital, there were quite a number of Manchus in the teahouse, naturally the storyteller did not dare to openly use the word 'Tatars', he only used the term Yuan troops and Yuan generals; yet he spoke with such a gusto that his spittle flew everywhere. Wei Xiaobao was listening with rapt attention. Suddenly someone said, "Excuse me!" and sat on the empty chair on Wei Xiaobao's tea table. Wei Xiaobao frowned, he was somewhat impatient.

The man said quietly, "*Xiaoren* have a very good medicinal plaster, which I want to sell to Gong-gong, would Gong-gong like to take a look?"

Wei Xiaobao turned his head around and saw a medicinal plaster on the table, half blue, half red; his heart was stirred. "What kind of plaster is this?" he asked.

The man replied, "This is medicinal plaster to get rid of virulent poison, to regain vision on both eyes." Lowering his voice he said, "It has a name, it's called 'Drive Qing Restore Ming' plaster."

Wei Xiaobao turned his attention to the man; he was around thirty years old, with thriving heroic spirit, not at all like the old man Xu his Shifu had described to him. He became suspicious, so he asked, "How much do you want for this medicinal plaster?"

"Three *taels* of silver and three *taels* of gold," the man replied.

"Would you sell it for five *taels* of silver and five *taels* of gold?"

Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Isn't that a bit too expensive?" the man replied.

"Not expensive, not expensive," Wei Xiaobao said, "As long as it can really get rid of clear poison and restore clarity, even if I have to work like an ox or a horse for you, it is not expensive at all."

The man pushed the medicinal plaster toward Wei Xiaobao and said in low voice, "Gong-gong, please step aside to talk." Finished speaking, he stood up and walked out of the teahouse. Wei Xiaobao tossed two-hundred *wen* worth coins on the table, took the medicinal plaster, and walked out.

The man was waiting outside the teahouse; he walked toward the east, turned into an alley, and stopped. "The earth shakes high mound, a mountain creek is elegant for all eternity," he said.

Wei Xiaobao said, "The gate faces the ocean, the three rivers and the water will flow for ten thousand years." Without waiting for the man to reply, he asked him first, "Which hall by the red flower pavilion does Sire live?"

The man replied, "*Xiongdi* is from the Green Wood Hall."

Wei Xiaobao asked, "How many fragrant incense sticks are burning in the hall?"

The man replied, "Three fragrant incense sticks!"

Wei Xiaobao nodded. He thought, "Your position is two levels below mine."

The man cupped his fist and bowed, he said in a low voice, "*Gege* ['older brother' – used in a more intimate way] is the one burning five incense sticks in the Green Wood Hall, Wei *Xiangzhu*?"

"Exactly," Wei Xiaobao replied; in his heart he said, "You are

much older than I am, but you call me *Gege*; it's really pleasant to hear, but why don't you call me *Yeye* or *Shushu* [paternal grandfather and younger uncle, respectively]?"

The man said, "*Xiongdi* is surnamed Gao, called Yanchao, I am Wei *Xiangzhu*'s subordinate. I have long heard about *Xiangzhu*'s illustrious name, today we can meet, it is indeed my great fortune."

Inwardly, Wei Xiaobao was very happy, he laughed and said, "Gao *Dage* is too kind. We all are brothers, there is no need to be polite."

Gao Yanchao said, "There is a *Dage* by the surname Xu in our Hall who sells medicine at the Heavenly Bridge. Today he was beaten and is seriously injured; I came with a specific purpose to inform Wei *Xiangzhu*."

Wei Xiaobao was shocked; he said, "I was busy in the Palace these days, I haven't had time to go look for him. How is his injury? Who beat him?"

"This is not a convenient place for a detailed report," Gao Yanchao said, "Would Wei *Xiangzhu* please come with me?" Wei Xiaobao nodded.

Passing through seven, eight streets, they reached an alley, where Gao Yanchao entered a drug store. Wei Xiaobao noticed the board above the door had five characters on it, but naturally he did not recognize even a single one, yet he did not need to examine the board carefully, presumably it was the name of the drug store; he simply followed Gao Yanchao into the store.

Behind the counter sat a fat shopkeeper. Gao Yanchao went up to him and whispered something into his ear. The fat storekeeper repeatedly replied, "Yes, yes!" Standing up, he nodded to Wei Xiaobao and said, "Honorable guest wants to buy superior quality drug ingredients, please come in!" He directed

Wei Xiaobao and Gao Yanchao toward the inner hall, passed through several doors, then leaned over to lift open a trap door on the floor, revealing a hole with stone steps leading down.

Wei Xiaobao saw the hole was pitch-black, his heart was full of suspicions, “Are these two really Tian Di Hui brothers? I am afraid they are a bit unreliable. If downstairs is a room to slaughter Wei Xiaobao, won’t it be terrible?” But Gao Yanchao was right behind him, he simply could not shrink back, so without any choice he had to follow the shopkeeper walked into the tunnel. Fortunately the tunnel was quite short; after walking only a dozen or so steps, the shopkeeper pushed open a plank door, from which came a lantern light.

Wei Xiaobao walked in. It was a small room about ten *chi* square, there were five men sitting in that room, plus a man lying on a low couch. With the addition of the three of them, there was barely enough room to turn around. Fortunately the shopkeeper withdrew immediately.

Gao Yanchao said, “Brothers, Wei *Xiangzhu* has arrived!”

The five men inside the room cheered together; they stood up and bowed to salute. The underground room was too small, they all crowded together. Wei Xiaobao cupped his fist to return the salute. He saw there was a Taoist priest among these people, whom he had met before, it was Priest Xuanzhen. Wei Xiaobao remembered that the priest had cracked a joke, telling Guan Anji to divorce his wife, the '100% real gold'. There was another man surnamed Fan, whom he also had met. Seeing these two familiar faces, Wei Xiaobao was relieved.

Gao Yanchao pointed to the man lying on the low couch and said, “Xu *Dage* is seriously injured, he is unable to get up to pay his respect.”

“You are too kind, you are too kind!” Wei Xiaobao said. He stepped forward to look at the man lying on the couch and saw

that on his wrinkled face there was not the least bit trace of blood, his eyes were shut tight, his breathing was weak, and there were spots of blood on his white long beard. "I wonder who has injured Xu *Dage*?" he asked, "Is it ... is it the Tatars' eagle claws?"

Gao Yanchao shook his head, "It's not," he said, "It was people from Mu Palace of Yunnan."

Wei Xiaobao was startled, "Mu Palace of Yunnan?" he asked, "They ... they are on our side, aren't they?"

Gao Yanchao slowly shook his head and said, "Reporting to *Xiangzhu Dage*: Just now when Xu *Dage* was brought here into the Return Of Spring Drug Store, he spoke haltingly that two young men from the Mu Palace, both of them have the surname of Bai ..."

"Surname Bai?" Wei Xiaobao said, "Aren't they the descendant of four great generals of the Mu Palace?"

"Most likely," Gao Yanchao replied, "Probably they are Bai Hansong and Bai Hanfeng brothers, the so-called 'Twin Tree[99] of the Bai Clan'."

"A pair of rotten woods," Wei Xiaobao muttered to himself, "What's so special about that?"

Gao Yanchao said, "From what Xu *Dage* was saying, they had a dispute over supporting Tang or supporting Gui, the more they talked, the more heated the argument, finally a fight broke. It was hard for Xu *Dage*'s pair of fists to match four hands, hence he suffered a serious injury."

"Two against one, it was not the conduct of a hero or a warrior," Wei Xiaobao said, "What do you mean by Tang and Gui? Could it be ... could it be ..." He thought that 'supporting Gui' might mean they were supporting him, Xiao Guizi, but then he thought it was unlikely, so he did not say anything.

Gao Yanchao said, "The Mu Palace are King Gui's followers, we Tian Di Hui are the subordinates of the King Tang, the Son of Heaven of the past. Xu *Dage* must have been arguing with them over the successor of the throne to such an extent as the argument turned into a fight."

Wei Xiaobao still did not understand, "What King Gui's followers, King Tang's subordinates?"

Gao Yanchao said, "King Gui is not the rightful emperor ordained by heaven, our King Tang is the true heir of the Son of Heaven."

Priest Xuanzhen understood Wei Xiaobao's background; he knew the amount of information in Wei Xiaobao's belly was limited, so he chimed in, "Wei *Xiangzhu*, when Li Zicheng broke into Beijing, he hounded Emperor Chongzhen to his death. Wu Sangui was leading the Qing troops to enter the pass and occupy our beautiful rivers and mountains. One after another loyal ministers and patriots across the country endorsed the descendant of *Taizu Huangdi* as the King. First it was King Fu who became the Emperor in Nanjing. Afterwards King Fu was harmed by the Tatars, our King Tang became the Emperor in Fujian; he was the one to whom Koxinga, the Zheng family, gave their allegiance to, naturally he was the true heir of the Son of Heaven. Who would have thought that another group of people in Guangxi and Yunnan was endorsing King Gui as the Son of Heaven, and yet another group of people in Zhejiang was endorsing King Lu to be the Emperor. All of them were phony sons of heaven."

Wei Xiaobao nodded and said, "The sky cannot have two suns, the people cannot have two masters. If King Tang has become the Emperor, King Gui and King Lu cannot be the Emperor."

"That's right," Gao Yanchao said, "What Wei *Xiangzhu* said is very true!"

Priest Xuanzhen said, "But the people of Guangxi and Zhejiang are seeking after riches and honor, in their strive they say that whoever gets their support is the true heir of the rightful emperor, so everybody has been fighting violently." He sighed, and then continued, "Later on, King Tang, King Lu and King Gui met disaster one after another. Over the last several years, Jianghu heroes do not forget the Ming household, separately they try to find the descendants of these three kings, and regarded them as their masters, while continuing the great undertaking of fighting the Qing restoring the Ming. King Gui's followers supported King Gui's descendants, King Lu's followers supported King Lu's descendants; they are called the Gui faction and the Lu faction; to them, we, Tian Di Hui are known as the Tang faction. All three factions, Tang, Gui, and Lu are fighting the Qing to restore the Ming. But only our Tian Di Hui is legitimate, those Gui and Lu factions are simply usurping the throne."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "I understand," he said, "Those people from Mu Palace belong to the Gui faction, right?"

"Exactly," Priest Xuanzhen said, "For the least dozen of years, the people from these three factions are continuously fighting each other."

Wei Xiaobao recalled that day on the road north of Jiangsu they came across someone from Mu Palace, who was very arrogant and rude. That man's surname was also Bai, he wondered if he had any relation with these two rotten woods. At that time he saw how scared Mao Shiba was, so early on he already had dissatisfaction toward the Bai family. He said, "Since King Tang was already made the heir of the throne, they should not vie for it anymore. I heard Mu *Gongye* [`master duke] was a very good man, I am afraid after the Senior returned to heaven, the people under his command were creating all these disturbance."

Everybody in that underground room said together, "Wei *Xiangzhu* is absolutely right."

Priest Xuanzhen said, "The warriors of Jianghu look at Mu Tianbo, Mu *Gongye*'s display of utter loyalty to his death that whenever we come across people from the Mu Palace we are 30% yielding to them. Thus, even any cat and dog from Mu Palace are all arrogant and conceited. You won't find a better man than our Xu *Dage*, formerly he served under the rightful emperor King Tang; he is truly loyal and devoted, whenever the late emperor is mentioned, tears would flow from his eyes. It must be that the Mu Palace people were talking one thing or another and have insulted the late emperor. Otherwise, how could Xu *Laoge* fight those Mu Palace people?"

Gao Yanchao said, "Just before noon Xu *Dage* came to his senses for a while, he wanted all the brothers to vent his anger. Presently, Wei *Xiangzhu* is the only *Xiangzhu* within the Zhili[100] borders; according to our Society's rules, in important matter such as this, we must report clearly to Wei *Xiangzhu* before taking any action. It's not a big deal if we were dealing with Tatars' eagle claws, the more we kill Tatars and eagle claws the better, our brothers would gladly sacrifice ourselves for our Society. But Mu Palace's reputation in Jianghu is so resounding, plus they are on our side. If we go to negotiate with them, we might end up waging a war with them. What will the consequences be, it is hard to say."

"Mmm," Wei Xiaobao mumbled noncommittally.

Gao Yanchao continued, "Xu *Dage* said that he has been waiting for Wei *Xiangzhu*'s visit; he has been waiting for several months. Sometimes he saw Wei *Xiangzhu* on the street or in the market buying things, sometimes he saw you sitting in the teahouse listening to stories."

Wei Xiaobao's face blushed slightly. "So he has seen me," he

said.

Gao Yanchao said, "Xu *Dage* said that according to *Zongduozhu*'s order, if Wei *Xiangzhu* has anything he needed, he will go to look for him. Therefore, although Xu *Dage* has seen Wei *Xiangzhu*, he did not dare to come forward and introduce himself."

Wei Xiaobao nodded, he cast a glance toward the old man lying on the couch and mused, "Turns out this old fox has been following me in secret. He had early on seen me buying things and eating indiscriminately on the street, spending money recklessly. Damn it, someday he will see my Shifu and will definitely tell tales. It would be best if this old fox won't recover from his injury and die!"

"We talked about this, and had no choice but to ask Wei *Xiangzhu*'s presence and preside over this matter," Priest Xuanzhen said.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "I am but a child, what matter can I possibly preside over?" But seeing these people were so respectful toward him, in his heart he could not help but feeling very proud of himself. When he first joined Tian Di Hui, besides his Shifu, the other nine *Xiangzhu* were all much more senior than him. Presently, his position was the highest among these people, suddenly he felt his body was as light as a feather.

A thick and solid middle-aged man indignantly said, "We are 30% yielding to the Mu Palace people, it is indeed out of deep respect toward Mu *Gongye*'s loyalty and self-sacrifice for the country. Speaking about great undertaking of overthrowing the imperial court, perhaps our Koxinga was ten times better than Mu *Wangye*."

The one surnamed Fan, Fan Gang said, "I respect you five *chi*, you should respect me one *zhang*. When we are polite to them, how can they be more arrogant instead? If we do not sort this

matter clearly, later on when Mu Palace step on our Tian Di Hui's head, we won't be able to stand up, how can we lift our head high when dealing with them?"

One said a word, the other said a sentence, everybody was very angry. Priest Xuanzhen said, "How to handle this matter, everybody must listen to Wei *Xiangzhu*'s instruction." If he wanted Wei Xiaobao to imitate the dog and steal the chicken or swindle people, Wei Xiaobao would have come up with some ideas; but facing an important matter like this and his decision was expected, it would be the same as telling him to make a fool of himself on the spot. However, he was indeed a disciple of Chen Jinnan, one of the ten *Xiangzhu* of Tian Di Hui, within the whole region of Zhili, he was the leader of Tian Di Hui brethrens; that old man surnamed Xu and those other people were Green Wood Hall members, subordinates under his personal command. Immediately everybody's eyes were on his face; he could not help but feeling embarrassed. "Hot piece mama," he cursed in his heart, "What … what shall I do?"

In his embarrassment, he looked at their faces one by one, trying to look for a clue, perhaps he would find an idea. When his gaze met with that of the sturdy man, suddenly he saw the corners of the man's mouth showed a faint smile, while his eyes revealed a sly look. This man was raising a clamor just a moment ago, his breast was filled with fury, how could he suddenly be happy? Thinking hard, he suddenly remembered, "Aiyo! Hot piece mama, this bunch of sons of a b1tch does not have good intentions; they want me to carry the rotten wood on my shoulder. They want to fight the Mu Palace people, but are afraid my Shifu would blame them, so they asked me to come and take the initiative for them." The more he thought, the more he was convinced that he was right. "I am only a teenage child," he mused, "Although I am the *Xiangzhu*, how can my idea really surpass theirs? They only want to make me their shield to block the arrow; it's alright if nothing bad

happens, but if thing goes bad, they would push the blame on my head, saying, 'It was the Green Wood Hall Wei *Xiangzhu* who leads everybody to do it; *Xiangzhu*'s order, we did not dare not to obey.' Humph, they want to find bones in the egg to depose me of my *Xiangzhu* position. I lead everybody to fight Mu Palace people, regardless of who wins who loses, it is indeed a very big bone. Alright, hot piece mama, *laozi* will not fall into this trick."

He lowered his head, pretending to contemplate; after a while, he said, "All *Gege*, although *Xiaodi* is the *Xiangzhu*, it was because accidentally I killed Oboi, I do not have the least bit of talent, let alone any good plan. In my opinion, it is best if we ask Priest Xuanzhen to offer an advice; certainly he is much wiser than me." This move of his was called 'pushing the boat with the current', he wanted to push the rotten wood onto Priest Xuanzhen's shoulder.

Priest Xuanzhen chuckled; turning toward Fan Gang he said, "Fan *San Ge*'s [third older brother] brain is a lot more brilliant than mine; what do you think?"

Fan Gang was a straightforward man; he said, "I'll say there is no other way; we must find the surnamed Bai's home, if they kowtow to Xu *Dage* and apologize, we'll let all matters rest. Otherwise, humph, humph, perhaps we will be forced to use peaceful measures before using force."

It was precisely what everybody had in their minds; its just that in Jianghu, the Mu Palace's prestige was quite thriving, plus they were their compatriots in fighting the Qing to restore the Ming, so nobody was willing to be the first to propose the idea. As soon as Fan Gang said those words, several people immediately parroted, "Right! Right! Fan *San Ge* is right; naturally it will be best if we can avoid violence, otherwise our Tian Di Hui will be bullied by others. Could it be that when people beat us up like this we'll just let it go?"

Wei Xiaobao turned to Priest Xuanzhen and the other man and said, “What do the two of you think?”

The man said, “This is called 'forced to climb the beam, we have no choice but to catch up'." Priest Xuanzhen smiled and nodded, but decline to make any comment.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "You don't want to speak, in the future you can deny any responsibility. I will definitely make you responsible." Thereupon he asked, "Priest Xuanzhen, you are thinking that Fan *San Ge*'s idea is not too appropriate, aren't you?"

Priest Xuanzhen said, "It's not that it is inappropriate, it's just that everybody has to think it through; if we are going to fight the Mu Palace people, first, we must not lose, second, we cannot kill anybody. If someone get killed, this matter will turn very serious."

Fan Gang said, "So be it. But what if Xu *Dage* died because of his serious injury?" Priest Xuanzhen simply nodded again.

Wei Xiaobao said, "I am asking everybody to propose a plan. All *Gege* have a lot of knowledge and experience, you have eaten a lot more salt than the rice I ate, you have passed a lot more bridges than the road I walked, the idea you can think of will definitely a lot better than I can come up with."

Priest Xuanzhen cast a glance at him, he said indifferently, "Wei *Xiangzhu* is amazing!"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Priest, you are not bad yourself."

They talked over this matter for a while, the basic idea was still according to Fan Gang's proposal, they asked Wei Xiaobao to lead them in finding the Mu Palace people's whereabouts and condemn them. They would all bring concealed weapons, but would try to exercise forbearance as much as possible, to have full control of the situation. It would be better if the Mu Palace

people start the fight, then they would have the pretext of retaliation.

Priest Xuanzhen said, "There is no harm in us inviting several famous martial art masters in Beijing to come with us, we can ask them to be the witness, to avoid a rumor from spreading, saying that we, Tian Di Hui, are taking unfair advantage of other people. If right or wrong is unclear, I am afraid in the future *Zongduozhu* will blame us."

"That's wonderful," Wei Xiaobao happily said, "We need to invite those with high skill, the more the better." He recalled how at the restaurant along the way north of Jiangsu that man surnamed Bai from the Mu Palace threw chopsticks one by one and made Wu Sangui's men fell down on the ground, right now that scene was so vivid in his mind. If once again they do the 'blowing copper horn and crossing the river, shooting the elephants with rocket' trick, although within the city of Beijing they could not dispatch the elephant formation, but even with only mice formation, the Green Wood Hall's Wei *Xiangzhu* would not be able to escape unscathed. He was just thinking of making an excuse so he would not have to go, but had not found any idea; suddenly he heard Priest Xuanzhen's suggestion to invite renowned Beijing's martial art masters to come along, it was exactly what he was hoping for.

With a slight smile Priest Xuanzhen said, "We only invite those masters with respectable reputation, not to ask them to help us fighting; whether they have good martial art skill or not is secondary."

Gao Yanchao said, "Those with respectable reputation will most likely have high level of martial art skill." He was in support of Wei Xiaobao. Priest Xuanzhen nodded.

"Which martial art masters will we invite?" Fan Gang asked. They immediately discussed who they were going to ask to come along. The persons invited must have quite a reputation

in Wulin, must have had no dealings with the authorities, and must have had somewhat favorable relationship with Tian Di Hui.

After this matter was decided, they were just about to separately invite the people, when all of a sudden the old man Xu groaned, "No ... no ... must not invite any outsiders."

Fan Gang said, "Xu *Dage*, did you say we must not invite any outsiders?"

The old man Xu said, "Wei *Xiangzhu* serves ... serves as a government official in the Palace, this ... this matter must not leak out. This ... this is a matter of ... a matter of life and death."

Hearing this, they all realized he was right. Wei Xiaobao was a court eunuch in the Palace, naturally it was under *Zongduozhu*'s order, there must be a major secret scheme behind it. Once an outsider know about it, it would be difficult to prevent rumors from spreading.

Fan Gang said, "Wei *Xiangzhu* does not need to personally come with us. We are going to talk reason with those two surnamed Bai men; whatever the outcome, we'll report to Wei *Xiangzhu* when we come back."

At first Wei Xiaobao was rather afraid of the Mu Palace, but since they were going to invite several famous martial art masters of Wulin world to come with them, it was like a guaranteed victory without any possibility of defeat; just like gambling with those 'cattle' using mercury-loaded dice, how could he bear to be left out? Thereupon he said, "It won't be fun if I don't go. Just don't tell the outsiders my real name and status."

Priest Xuanzhen said, "If Wei *Xiangzhu* change his outfit and go in disguise, nobody will know that he works in the Palace ..."

Before he even finished, Wei Xiaobao had already clapped and

cheered; "Wonderful! Wonderful!" he repeatedly shouted. This idea was exactly what he needed. To visit someone's house and create trouble was already very amusing, creating trouble after dressing up was even more interesting. Originally everybody else was thinking that if it wasn't the fact that Wei *Xiangzhu* was their leader, he would be more of a liability to them; but seeing his enthusiasm and his determination to come along, nobody raised any objection.

The old man Xu said, "Everybody ... everybody must be very careful. Wei *Xiangzhu*, what ... what are you going to dress up as?" Everybody turned their eyes toward Wei Xiaobao, waiting to hear his idea.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Shall I dress up as a wealthy family boy, or shall I dress up as a little beggar?" At the brothel, he was quite envious to see the visitors of the courtyard, who were mostly the sons of rich and influential families, were dressed in magnificent and expensive looking clothing and personal adornments, but all along he had never had any opportunity to dress like that. After slight hesitation, he fished three banknotes, worth five hundred *taels* each, from his pocket and said, "Here I have a thousand five hundred *taels*; I must bother one *Dage* to buy me some clothes."

Everybody was slightly startled; almost together several of them said, "But we won't need that much money?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "I have the money, the more expensive the clothes the better, buy some jewelry too, when I wear all that, nobody will know that I am a Palace ... a Palace's little eunuch."

"Wei *Xiangzhu* is right," Priest Xuanzhen said, "Gao *Xiongdi*, go and buy some clothes for Wei *Xiangzhu*."

Wei Xiaobao took out another banknote worth a thousand *taels* and said, "Spend some more money; it doesn't matter."

Seeing a little child with that much money in his disposal,

everybody was secretly amazed. Whatever people say, nobody could have guessed that he still had more than four hundred thousand *taels* at home. Based on Wei Xiaobao's original character, if he had two or three *taels* with him, he would not feel comfortable until he spent it all; but how would he spend more than four hundred thousand *taels*? To be able to buy magnificent and expensive clothes and be able to show off was indeed an opportunity that was hard to come by; he was very happy in his heart. Seeing the people's dumbfounded expression, he put his hand into his bosom again.

When his hand came out, there were banknotes in his palm, worth three thousand and five hundred *taels*, which he handed over to Priest Xuanzhen, saying, “Today is the first time *Xiongdi* meets all *Dage*, I do not have any present for you. I got this money from that Tatars’ place over there, it’s all ill … ill money [Book note: he was thinking of saying ‘ill-gotten gain’ 不义之财, but this phrase was too hard, he was unable to remember the rest.], I am asking everybody to help me spend it.”

Tian Di Hui’s rules were strict; taking other people’s property was strictly prohibited. Fan Gang, Gao Yanchao and the others had been poor for a long time, suddenly seeing Wei *Xiangzhu* drew out that much banknotes and explicitly stated that it was the Tatars' ill-gotten wealth, which must be true since he was working in the Qing Palace, everybody could not help but cheering loudly.

Priest Xuanzhen said, "We must separately invite those people; it is too late today. Wei *Xiangzhu*, all of us will respectfully wait for your honorable self in here, I wonder what time will you be able to arrive."

Wei Xiaobao said, "I have work to do in the morning, I will definitely be here in the afternoon."

"Very good," Xuanzhen said, "We'll meet here tomorrow afternoon, and then we'll leave together to settle the account

with those two surname Bai's."

That night Wei Xiaobao's heart was unbearably itchy, he jumped up and down in his room, gesticulating while talking to himself. The next morning, from the Upper Study Room he hurriedly went to a jewelry store to buy a big emerald ring, and asked the shop owner to attach a large piece of white jade and four perfectly round pearls onto his satin cap. Just like that he spent more than four thousand *taels*. Seeing the rich customer was a court eunuch from the Palace, the shop owner did not have the slightest suspicion, since when people from the Palace bought jewelry, ten times that amount was not uncommon.

Wei Xiaobao hurried back to Hui Chun Tang [Return of Spring Hall] drug store, everybody else had been waiting for him in the basement. They reported that they managed to invite Bejing's four well-known martial art masters to come with them as their witnesses. Each one of those masters received two hundred *taels* for their trouble. Wei Xiaobao mused, "Wealth brings people, calamity drives away people; these four martial art masters will have to help us. It's just that two hundred *taels* as a thank you gift is too few, it would be better if they receive five hundred *taels* each. Four martial art masters are too few, it would be better to invite sixteen."

Gao Yanchao produced some clothes, shoes and socks for Wei Xiaobao to change into, each one was utterly luxurious; the outer long-gown was lined with fire fox fur, the collar and the sleeves were lined with glossy and bright-colored fur. Gao Yanchao said, "I asked them to alter the fur gown into smaller size in the same night, I paid them three *taels* and six *qian* extra."

"Not expensive, not expensive," Wei Xiaobao repeatedly said. There was an azure-colored satin magua [a buttoned mandarin jacket of the Qing Dynasty]; it had ten buttons made of real gold; yet in spite of this extravagant attire, Gao Yanchao did not

even spend half of the money Wei Xiaobao had given him.

Wei Xiaobao had been living in the Palace for close to a year. Residence alters character, nurturing alters body; he ate proper food and gained a lot of knowledge and experience, and for the last half a year he had been the head of the Catering Department, he had more than a hundred eunuchs at his disposal, so for quite a while he was accustomed to be a leader. Presently he was dressing up in fancy clothes; although he still had a rather tacky impression of a *nouveau riche*, his style was by no means appeared ordinary. With his exuberant manner, he had distinguished himself from Fan Gang, Gao Yanchao and other warriors of the wilderness.

A sedan chair had been prepared, waiting outside the door. They asked Wei Xiaobao to ride on it, so that while traveling on the street in disguise, he would not come across a eunuch or court official from the Palace. Their entourage went to the Wusheng Escort Agency at Dongcheng district first, to rendezvous with the four martial art masters. Of these four martial art masters, the first one was the headmaster of Beijing Tantui[101] School, Old Master Ma Boren, a member of Qingzhen Cult; the second one was a famous physician Yao Chun. When the Old Xu was injured, he was treated by this physician. This man was not only a famous physician, his *qinna* and close-combat skill was also profound. The third one earned the nickname of 'Tiger-face Overlord', Lei Yixiao; his iron-armor skill was very famous. The fourth one was none other than the head escort of the Wusheng Escort Agency himself, the Golden Spear Wang Wutong.

Ma Boren and the others, four people, had already learned that Tian Di Hui's leader Wei *Xiangzhu* was very young. When they met, they were very surprised to see that he looked like a teenager from a powerful and wealthy family. However, they all respected Chen Jinnan's great name, thinking that although the

disciple of Tian Di Hui's *Zongduozhu* was very young, certainly he had an astonishing skill, hence they did not dare to belittle him.

After drinking some tea at the escort agency office, they continued their journey together to the Willow Tree Lane where the two surnamed Bai men resided. Wei Xiaobao, Ma Boren and Yao Chun three people rode on sedan chairs, while Lei Yixiao and Wang Wutong rode horses; the rest of the entourage accompanied them on foot. Priest Xuanzhen, Fan Gang, and the others were famous characters, Wang Wutong wanted to let them use his horse, but Xuanzhen was afraid they would attract attention, so he adamantly refused.

Finally they arrived outside a vermillion-painted gate of a large house on Willow Tree Lane. Gao Yanchao was about to step forward to knock on the door when suddenly they heard faint weeping sound coming from inside. Everybody was startled, they saw by the main gate there were two white lanterns, a sign that the family was in mourning. Gao Yanchao knocked the knocker ring lightly on the door. After a while the gate opened, an old housekeeper came out. Gao Yanchao presented five name cards, which they had prepared beforehand, and said, "Several friends from Wusheng Escort Agency, Tantui School and Tian Di Hui are here to pay their respect to Bai *Da Xia* and Bai *Er Xia* [Great Hero and Second Hero, respectively]."

As soon as the housekeeper heard three words 'Tian Di Hui', he raised his eyebrows and shot an angry look while he glowered at everybody. Receiving the visiting cards, without saying anything he went back in.

Although Ma Boren was already old, his temper was actually quite fiery; unable to restrain his anger he said, "This servant is very rude."

"Ma *Laoye* [old master/gentleman] is exactly right," Wei

Xiaobao said. He was actually very afraid of the Mu Palace people, he was hoping that Ma Boren, Wang Wutong and the others would stand by his side, so that when the fight broke later on, he would have several capable helpers.

Quite a while later, a man about twenty-six or twenty-seven years old came out. He was very tall, his entire body was covered in mourning garment; his eyes were red as the tears in his eyes had not dried up. Cupping his fist he said, "Wei *Xiangzhu*, Ma *Laoyezi*, Wang *Zongbiaotou* [Head escort], gentlemen, it is an honor to have you here, welcome. Bai Hanfeng pays his respect to you." Everybody also cupped their fists to return the salute.

Bai Hanfeng led everybody to the main hall. Ma Boren was most impatient; he asked, "Bai *Er Xia*, you are wearing mourning attire, I wonder which family member of yours has passed away?"

Bai Hanfeng replied, "It's my older brother Hansong who was unfortunate and died."

Ma Boren stomped his foot. "What a pity, what a pity!" he said, "The two Bai brothers were Mu Palace's heroes and brave generals, who were greatly well-known in Wulin. Bai *Da Xia* was in the prime of his life, I wonder what illness did he suffer?"

They had just entered the main hall and were not seated yet, hearing this, Bai Hanfeng suddenly turned around, it was as if his eyes were shooting fire. "Ma *Laoyezi*," he said harshly, "*Zaixia* regards you as a Wulin senior, and thus has treated you with due respect. You are asking something you already know, are you ridiculing me?"

Wei Xiaobao was taken aback that Bai Hanfeng got so angry suddenly; he was scared and took a step back. Ma Boren stroked his white beard and said, "That's strange! *Laofu* [lit. old man - referring to self] did not know, hence I asked. What do

you mean asking something I already know? Bai *Er Xia*'s older brother has just died, even if your heart is full of sorrow, there is no need to have a fit of temper to this old man!"

'Humph," Bai Hanfeng snorted and said, "Please sit down!"

Ma Boren mumbled to himself, "Fine, I'll sit down, do you think I am scared?" Turning to Wei Xiaobao he said, "Wei *Xiangzhu*, please take the seat of honor."

"No, Ma *Laoyezi* should take the seat of honor!" Wei Xiaobao replied.

When Bai Hanfeng looked at the visiting cards, he knew that among his guests there was a *Xiangzhu* of the Tian Di Hui's Green Wood Hall, Wei *Xiangzhu*; but he had never imagined that this teenager was *the* Wei *Xiangzhu*, he was surprised and angry. Reaching out, he grabbed Wei Xiaobao's left wrist and shouted, "You are Tian Di Hui's Wei *Xiangzhu*?"

The force behind this grab was extraordinarily strong, Wei Xiaobao felt the pain penetrated his bone. "Ah!" he screamed, two streams of tear involuntarily flowed down his cheeks.

Priest Xuanzhen said, "Please release your guest, Bai *Er Xia* took too much advantage of others!" Stretching out his finger, he jabbed Bai Hanfeng's side.

Bai Hanfeng blocked with his left hand while releasing Wei Xiaobao's wrist at the same time and took a step backward. "Please forgive my offense," he said.

Wei Xiaobao looked very distressed; he wiped the tears with his sleeve. It was totally beyond Bai Hanfeng's expectation; Ma Boren, Wang Wutong, as well as Tian Di Hui people were also surprised. They could see that although Bai Hanfeng's grab was very swift and fierce, it was not something that cannot be evaded. Yet as the disciple of Chen Jinnan, not only this Wei *Xiangzhu* did not dodge, he screamed and shed some tears too; it was truly a great marvel in the Wulin world. Xuanzhen, Fan

Gang, Gao Yanchao, and the others were blushing to their ears, they were greatly ashamed.

"I am sorry!" Bai Hanfeng said, "Elder brother was unfortunate to be killed under Tian Di Hui's evil scheme, *Zaixia*'s heart is grieved …"

"What?" before he could finished, everybody exclaimed one after another, "Bai *Da Xia* is killed by Tian Di Hui?" "How can there be such thing?" "There is absolutely no such thing."

Suddenly Bai Hanfeng stood up and loudly said, "You say there is absolutely no such thing, are you saying that my *Gege* did not die? Come, I want all of you to take a look." Stretching out his hand, he was about to grab and pull Wei Xiaobao's left arm. But this time Priest Xuanzhen and Fan Gang were prepared; as soon as Bai Hanfeng's right arm moved, the two of them, one toward his chest and the other toward his back, attacked simultaneously.

Immediately Bai Hanfeng turned his body sideways and took a step back, while his palms struck out right and left. Xuanzhen raised his left palm and struck with right palm; in the meantime, Fan Gang had already exchange a blow with Bai Hanfeng. Bai Hanfeng turned around and aimed for Xuanzhen's throat. Xuanzhen leaned sideways to evade. Bai Hanfeng fiercely said, "My *Dage* died under your hands, I don't want to live anymore. Tian Di Hui's dogs, come up together!"

The famous physician Yao Chun sprang up and spread out his arms to block. "Wait, don't fight!" he said, "There is a misunderstanding here. Bai *Er Xia* keeps saying that Bai *Da Xia* was killed by Tian Di Hui, but what had really happened? Please explain to us clearly."

"All of you come with me!" Bai Hanfeng said, and walked in big strides toward the inner hall. Everybody thought that since their number was greater, they were not afraid he might have

any plot or trick, they followed him inside.

As soon as they reached the courtyard, they all halted on the spot. They saw the rear hall was arranged as a mourning hall, with a coffin behind the mourning curtains, and a dead body lying inside the coffin; half of the body's head, as well as its pair of feet, were visible. Bai Hanfeng raised the mourning curtains and called out in loud voice, "*Gege*, you died without your eyes closed, *Xiongdi* is going to kill several Tian Di Hui dogs to avenge you." His voice was hoarse, obviously because he had been crying for a long time.

Wei Xiaobao went to see the dead person's appearance and he was shocked. He had seen this person in that little restaurant along the way north of Jiangsu; he was the one striking Wu Sangui's troops with chopsticks, his martial art skill excelled, it was hard to imagine that he would die in here. Immediately he thought that the opposite party had one less formidable persona; his shock was covered with a feeling a relief.

Ma Boren, Yao Chun, Lei Yixiao, Wang Wutong, four people stepped closer to the coffin. Wang Wutong was an acquaintance of Bai Hanfeng; he sighed and said, "Bai *Da Xia* has indeed passed away; what a pity!"

Yao Chun was a particularly cautious man, he stretched out his hand to check the dead body's pulse on his wrist. With a cold laugh Bai Hanfeng said, "If you manage to get my *Gege* from the grave, I … I will kowtow to you twelve thousand times."

Yao Chun sighed and said, "Bai *Er Xia*, the dead cannot come back to life; please restrain your grief. Are you sure it was Tian Di Hui people who harmed Bai *Da Xia*? Bai *Er Xia* has not made a mistake?"

"I … I made a mistake?" Bai Hanfeng screamed, "How can I make mistake?"

Seeing his grief was beyond ordinary sorrow, one could see that the brotherly bond between the two of them was very deep; they all could not help from feeling sorry for him, Fan Gang's anger had subsided considerably, he thought, "His older brother is dead, no wonder he did not realize whether his action was light or heavy."

With arms on his waist, Bai Hanfeng stood in the middle of the mourning hall and loudly said, "The one who killed my *Gege* was the old thief surnamed Xu who day by day sells medicinal plaster on the Heavenly Bridge. That old thief's name is Xu Tianchuan, his bandit nickname is 'Eight-armed Ape', he is an officer in the Green Wood Hall of Tian Dihui, am I right? You still want to deny it?"

Fan Gang, Xuanzhen and the others looked at each other in blank dismay; they went to the Willow Tree Lane was actually to confront the two brothers of the Bai family, to inquire them why they injured somebody. Unexpectedly the older brother of the Bai family, Bai Hansong had died under Xu Tianchuan's hands. Fan Gang sighed and said, "Bai *Lao'er*, Xu Tianchuan, Xu *Dage* is our Tian Di Hui brother, that is true, but he … he …"

"He what?" Bai Hanfeng asked harshly.

"He is seriously injured by the two of you, he is on his last breath, I don't know if by this time he is still alive or already dead. To tell you the truth, the reason of our visit today is to inquire of you, two brothers, why did you beat our Xu *Dage* like that? Who would have thought … who could have imagined … ay …"

Bai Hanfeng angrily said, "Let's not talk about this old thief surnamed Xu has not died, even if he has, the life of that old thief who is worse than a dog or a pig is not fit to make up for my *Gege*'s life."

Fan Gang was also angry, "Your mouth is so filthy, what kind

of Wulin hero are you? So what do you want?”

“I … I don’t know,” Bai Hanfeng screamed, “I want to butcher all of you, Tian Di Hui dog thieves, and make you mincemeat. I will die with you, we all will die together.” Turning around, he pulled a steel blade from the dead body’s side, and then he leaped up like a mad tiger, brandishing the saber wildly, making a loud ‘whoosh, whoosh’ noise. Tian Di Hui’s Fan Gang, Xuanzhen, and the others also unsheathed their weapons, they were prepared to meet the enemy. Wei Xiaobao hastily withdrew behind Gao Yanchao.

Suddenly a loud roar was heard, “Stop fighting!” The voice shook everybody’s ears that their eardrums were buzzing. They saw the ‘Tiger Face Overlord’ Lei Yixiao raised both of his hands, standing in front of the Tian Di Hui group. With a loud voice he said, “Bai *Er Xia*, if you want to kill people, just kill me first!”

This man had a good surname, his given name was also fitting[102]; his shout indeed had the power of jolting thunder. Bai Hanfeng was grieving of his brother’s death; his mind was somewhat abnormal, as soon as he heard the shout, his brain cleared up slightly. He said, “Why would I want to kill you? It wasn’t you who killed my *Gege*?”

“These Tian Di Hui friends are not your *Gege*’s killer either,” Lei Yixiao said, “Besides, all over the world, Tian Di Hui has at least two, three hundred thousand members; can you kill them all?”

Bai Hanfeng was startled, he shouted, “Killing one means one less, killing a pair means a pair less!”

Suddenly from outside the door came a faint noise of hoof beats; it sounded like more than ten riders were rushing their way. Yao Chun said, “Perhaps government soldiers, everybody, hide your weapons!” Seeing Lei Yixiao was blocking in front of them, Fan Gang, Xuanzhen, and the others knew that it would

not be easy for Bai Hanfeng to pounce on them with brandished saber; hence they all hid their weapons.

Bai Hanfeng loudly said, “Even if the old man the emperor of heaven himself came, I am not scared.”

The hoof beats were drawing nearer and nearer toward the alley, and then the riders stopped abruptly in front of the main gate, followed by the knocker ring was pounded on the door. Someone outside called out, “Bai *Er Di*, it’s me!” A shadow flashed, a man jumped over the wall and rushed in.

This man was approximately forty years old, his bearing was imposing, but his expression greatly changed as with a trembling voice he said, “It’s really … really *Bai Da Di* … Bai *Da Di* …” [*Da Di* and *Er Di* are ‘first younger brother’ and ‘second younger brother’, respectively.]

Bai Hanfeng threw the steel blade in his hand and rushed out to meet him and called out, “Su *Si Ge* [fourth older brother], my *Gege* … my *Gege* …” Unable to continue, he broke in a bawl.

Ma Boren, Fan Gang, Xuanzhen and the others all thought, “Could it be that this man is the Mu Palace’s ‘Divine Physician Hermit’[103] Su Gang?”

At this moment the main gate was opened and about a dozen people, men and women, rushed in and ran straight toward the coffin. Several women immediately raised their voices in loud wailing. One young woman was Bai Hansong’s wife, another young woman was Bai Hanfeng’s wife.

Fan Gang, Xuanzhen, and the others felt awkward, they saw how these people were crying in extreme distress. If they did not leave now, after these people finished crying, even if they did not fight, unavoidably they would throw curses at them. Wei Xiaobao’s wrist was heavily gripped by Bai Hanfeng earlier, right now he felt the pain was still severe. Originally he wanted to

take advantage of their number and told Xuanzhen, Fan Gang and the rest to catch Bai Hanfeng for him, so that at least he could kick his damn butt seven or eight times. Unexpectedly, the opposite party now had more people, so that if a fight broke, it would not be too convenient to them; his heart was thumping madly. He saw Xuanzhen was signaling him with his eyes, obviously Xuanzhen wanted to wipe the oil from their soles, by slipping out quietly. It was exactly what Wei Xiaobao had in his mind. Immediately he turned around and walked away, while saying, "Everybody, let's go buy some *yuanbao* and candles, and come back here to pay respect to the dead!"

"Want to run away?" Bai Hanfeng shouted, "It's not that easy." Rushing forward, he sent his right palm fiercely toward Fan Gang's back.

"Who wants to run away?" Fan Gang angrily said, while lifting his left arm to block, but he did not retaliate. Xuanzhen and the others halted their steps. But Wei Xiaobao continued running toward the gate; he wanted to make sure one of his feet was across the threshold before seeing what would happen next.

The man surnamed Su asked, "Bai *Er Di*, who are these gentlemen? Please forgive *zaixia* for not recognizing them."

"They are Tian Di Hui dogs," Bai Hanfeng replied, "My *Gege* … *Gege* was killed by them." As soon as he blurted those words, the people who were prostrating and crying loudly suddenly leaped up. Continuous ringing was heard, weapons were flashing, instantly the guests were surrounded; even Ma Boren, Yao Chun, Lei Yixiao and Wang Wutong, four people were inside the encirclement.

Wang Wutong laughed aloud and said, "Ma *Dage*, Lei *Xiongdi*, Doctor Yao, since when did we join the Tian Di Hui? Based on our morality and conduct, I am afraid in the Tian Di Hui friends' eyes we are not fit to carry their shoes."

The middle-aged man surnamed Su cupped his fist. “So gentlemen are not from Tian Di Hui?” he asked, “This Doctor Yao, presumably your given name is Chun. *Zaixia* Su Gang. As soon as I learned that the older brother of Bai family had met a misfortune and died, from Wanping we rushed over here. In my grief I did not ask for guidance; this is indeed showing my lack in manners.” While saying that, he cupped his fist and bowed.

Wang Wutong also cupped his fist and bowed, “You are too kind, you are too kind,” he said, “Divine Physician Hermit, you have a fully justified reputation; you indeed have the knowledge and experience, and the bearing of a hero.” Right away he presented everybody present, one by one; the first one was naturally Wei Xiaobao. “This is Tian Di Hui Green Wood Hall’s Wei *Xiangzhu*.”

Su Gang knew that altogether Tian Di Hui had ten halls, each hall’s *xiangzhu* was a heroic warrior with unsurpassed skill; but this Wei *Xiangzhu* was obviously a teenager of a rich family whose smell of his mother’s milk had not yet dried, he could not help but was astonished, however, his face remained calm and collected. Cupping his fist he said, “An honor to meet you at last!”

Wei Xiaobao giggled and cupped his fist to return the propriety, from the threshold he walked back in. “Why is it an honor for you to meet me?” he asked.

Su Gang was startled; he said, “It’s an honor for *Zaixia* to meet Tian Di Hui’s ten *Xiangzhu*, each one is a hero and a warrior.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded; “So that’s how it is,” he said with a laugh. Seeing his cunning expression and sly tone, the doubt in Su Gang’s heart grew.

Presently Wang Wutong continued his introduction to the rest of the party. Su Gang also introduced the people who had come

with him. Two were his two younger martial brothers; the three of them were martial brothers with the two brothers of the Bai family. And then there were several disciples of Su Gang. Madame Bai Hansong was leaning over her husband's dead body and wept bitterly, Madame Bai Hanfeng was crying and comforting her at the same time. These women did not come over to be introduced.

Yao Chun said, "Bai *Er Xia*, what has exactly happened? How did the contention between Bai *Da Xia* and Tian Di Hui started? Would *Bai Er Xia* tell us?" He coughed, and then continued, "Wulin people are always looking up to the Mu Palace of Yunnan, Tian Di Hui's internal rules are always very strict, neither one are capricious and unreasonable people. The whole world cannot forego this 'reason', the matter of today cannot be settled by fighting or using martial art. Here we have Old Master Ma, Lei *Xiongdi*, Wang *Zongbiaotou*, as well as the trivial *Zaixia*, granted that we have no special friendship with either side, but we always admire both sides' reputation. Bai *Er Xia*, would you do it for out sake, how did it all happen?"

Wang Wutong said, "Not trying to conceal anything, I can tell you that the friends from Tian Di Hui really did not know that Bai *Da Xia* has passed away, otherwise, won't you say that their visit would be embarrassing?"

"In that case," Su Gang said, "For what reason did Wei *Xiangzhu* and other friends come to our humble place?"

Wang Wutong said, "We are not going to lie to you, Tian Di Hui friends said that their Xu Tianchuan, Xu *San Ge* has been beaten and seriously injured by Mu Palace people, so that he is already unable to speak. Hence they invited us, several old rotten men to accompany them to your respectable place to inquire the reason."

Su Gang grimly said, "If that so, everybody's visit here is to condemn us?"

“That we do not dare,” Wang Wutong said, “We make our living by mingling in the Jianghu, we entirely dependent on friends giving us face. Right or wrong, crooked or straight, it’s all a matter of public opinion, nobody can speak blindly against one’s conscience.”

Su Gang nodded. “Wang *Zongbiaotou* is right,” he said, “Please everybody come to the hall and talk.”

They all went to the main hall. Su Gang told his martial brothers and his disciples to sheathe their weapons. Bai Hanfeng was unwilling to lay down the steel blade in his hand. Su Gang let everybody sit, and then said, “Bai *Er Di*, what had really happened? Why don’t you tell it to everybody?”

Bai Hanfeng sighed, and then said, “The day before yesterday, in the afternoon …” He only said those words when he could not refrain anger from raising up, that he brandished the steel blade in his hand. Wei Xiaobao was startled and shrank back. Bai Hanfeng realized he had been too ill-mannered; with might he threw the steel blade to the ground. ‘Crash!’, it smashed two of the square bricks. With a heavy breathing he said, “In the afternoon the day before yesterday, *Gege* and I were having a drink in a wine shop on the Heavenly Bridge, when suddenly in came a government official with his four attendants. Those four attendants' conduct were loathsome, they asked for wine, asked for dishes, but they were speaking in Yunnan dialect.”

“Oh,” Su Gang said.

Bai Hanfeng continued, “When *Gege* and I heard them speak, we focused our attention.”

Wang Wutong, Fan Gang, and the others knew that for generations Mu Palace had ruled Yunnan. Su Gang, Bai Hanfeng, and the others grew up in Yunnan. Hearing a local accent in Beijing, naturally they would pay more attention.

Bai Hanfeng continued, “My *Gege* listened for a while before

he exchanged some greetings with the neighbor. Hearing that we are also from Yunnan, the government official invited us over and sit with him. *Gege* and I have left home for a long time, we wanted very much to hear news from our homeland. Seeing this government official had just arrived from Yunnan, we moved and sat with him. When we talked, the government official called himself Lu Yifeng, turns out he was on assignment, sent by Wu Sangui, to be the county head magistrate of Qujing County. He is from Dali in Yunnan. According to the rules, Yunnan native cannot be a local official in his own province. But this Lu Yifeng said that he was appointed by Ping Xi Wang, so he did not need to pay attention to the rules!"

Fan Gang could not refrain from cursing, "His granny, that big traitor to China Wu Sangui appoints a dog official, what a nerve!"

Bai Hanfeng cast him a glance, then he nodded and said, "This Fan … Fan *Xiong* said it well, at that time I also had such thought. But in order to hear more about our hometown situation, we flattered him several sentences instead. That dog official was even more complacent; he said that officials appointed by Wu Sangui are called 'Western Elect', meaning these officials are elected by Ping Xi Wang. All government officials in Yunnan, big and small, are appointed by Wu Sangui; even in Sichuan, Guangxi, Guizhou, three provinces, the western elects are more popular than those officials appointed by the Emperor himself."

Hearing Bai Hanfeng was speaking with a labored breathing, Su Gang interrupted by explaining, "If there is any vacant post, the imperial court will appoint an official, Wu Sangui will also appoint an official. Whoever assumes the post first will get the position. Whenever there is any vacant high level position post in Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan and Guangxi, for provinces,

naturally Kunming would find out first; and sending someone from Kunming is definitely a lot quicker. As a result, officials from the imperial court always lag behind those 'Western Elects'."

Bai Hanfeng took a deep breath and continued, "The official said that Ping Xi Wang has rendered a great service to the imperial court. The Manchus were able to conquer our rivers and mountains, it was entirely due to Ping Xi Wang, therefore, the imperial court shows special favor to him. Whatever memorial to the throne Wu Sangui submitted, it has never been rejected."

Wang Wutong said, "This official is actually telling the truth. Each time *Xiongdi* go into escort duty to the southwest provinces, I see it with my own eyes that people in Yunnan and Guangxi only know Wu Sangui, they do not know the Emperor."

Bai Hanfeng said, "This Lu Yifeng said that according to the imperial court's rules, all county head magistrates must go to the Capital to have an audience with the Emperor, the Emperor must personally confer the high official post. He came to Beijing, it was exactly to see the Emperor. He said that since Ping Xi Wang has already sealed his appointment, his coming to the Capital to see the Emperor is just a routine business. My *Gege* said, 'Official Lu is taking an official post in Qujing, a native become a government official in his own province, naturally you will do the people a lot of good.' That Lu Yifeng laughed aloud and said, 'Naturally.' Suddenly, someone sitting on another table butted in, that old ... that old thief ... my enmity with him is so deep ..." While saying that, he suddenly stood up, his face was bulging and was very red.

Su Gang said, "It was the ‘Eight-armed Ape’ Xu Tianchuan who spoke?"

Bai Hanfeng nodded. "Ex ... ex ..." in his great anger, his throat choked, he was unable to speak. After a while he

continued, "Exactly that old thief. He was sitting on a small table by the window, drinking wine. He butted in, saying, 'A native become a government official in his own province, it is even more convenient to plunder the land.' That old thief, we were talking to the official, who told him to be a blabbermouth?"

"Bai *Er Xia*," Xuanzhen coldly said, "What Xu *San Ge* said was not wrong."

"Humph," Bai Hanfeng snorted. After a short pause he said, "What he said was not wrong, I did not say that what he said was wrong, but ... but ... who told him to meddle other people's business? If he did not butt in, how could all these things happen?" Seeing he was short of breath, Xuanzhen did not say anything anymore.

Bai Hanfeng continued, "Hearing these words, Lu Yifeng flew into a rage; he slapped the table and turned his head, only to see that this old thief was a hunchback old man with wretched appearance. There was a medicine chest on the table, there was a medicinal plaster banner by his chair, so he was an old man who sells medicine. Lu Yifeng shouted, 'You, old codger, what nonsense are you talking about?' His four attendants have already scrambled over, they slapped the old thief's table and rained curses on him. One servant grabbed him by his collar. I was so blind that I could not see that old thief has a profound martial art skill; I was thinking that because of righteous indignation he spoke those words to mock. Afraid that he might get the worst of it, I came over to advise him and in the process pushed those four attendants away."

Xuanzhen praised him, "Bai *Er Xia* was thinking of benevolence and righteousness, it was indeed the conduct of a hero." He thought that Bai Hansong had died, while although Xu Tianchuan's injury was not light, he would most likely live, so it could be said that their side had had a small advantage. In

a lot of things both sides had to make peace, so he flattered Bai Hanfeng a little bit to let him calm down.

Who would have thought that Bai Hanfeng was unwilling to accept his praise; he stared at him and said, "What hero? I am a coward[104]! I have eyes but failed to be a good judge of character, I failed to see that this old thief was treacherous and murderous, and still thought that he was a good man. That Lu Yifeng turned into his official mode, he cursed incessantly, shouting, ‘Rebellion! Rebellion!’ He said that there are indeed many wicked citizens in the Capital that must be punished severely.”

Fan Gang interrupted, “That official is just like a dog threatens based on his master’s power; it’s not enough for him to bully the common people in Yunnan, he also came to Beijing to bully people.”

“It’s not that easy to bully people,” Ban Hanfeng said, “That official shouted repeatedly, telling his attendants to bind the old thief and send him to the authority, to have him beaten by forty big planks, to put him in wooden stocks and expose him publicly. That old thief giggled and said, ‘*Da Laoye*, why do you shout and make a racket? Aren’t you straining yourself? Let me prepare a medicinal plaster for you.’ From his medicine chest he took a sheet of medicinal plaster, which he pressed between his palms, immediately afterwards he flattened up the herbal plaster, which was originally folded and lumped together. When at first I saw how this old thief was not afraid of the fiendish attendants at all, I had begun to have suspicion, now that I saw the strength of his hands with which he pulled the plaster, *Gege* and I looked at each other; I finally understood. The lump of ointment in the middle of the plaster was stiff and hard; it has to be baked over the fire for a long time before it can be pulled open. But he only pressed it between his palms for a short moment and used his internal energy to bake it and made the

ointment soft, his power must be really extraordinary. When he flattened out the plaster, the ointment was steaming hot. But that Lu Yifeng did not realize it at all; he kept urging his attendants to go forward and arrest the man. I no longer care to stop those official's lackeys, since they were only asking trouble for themselves. Seeing I stepped out of the way, one of the attendants pounced on that old thief. The old thief laughed and said, 'Do you want medicinal plaster?' while putting the plaster on the attendant's hand. The attendant cursed, 'Old dog, what are you doing?' The old thief gave the attendant's arm a push, the attendant's body swiveled and 'slap!' the steaming hot plaster happened to stick onto that dog official, Lu Yifeng's mouth ..."

Hearing to this part, Wei Xiaobao could not show restraint anymore, he laughed and clapped his hands. Bai Hanfeng snorted and shot him a very fierce glare. Wei Xiaobao was scared and did not dare to laugh. "And then what happened?" Su Gang asked.

Bai Hanfeng said, "That dog official's mouth was sealed by the plaster, he busily reached up to pull the plaster. The old thief pushed the four attendants away and said, 'Go help *Da Laoye*!' I heard a continuous 'slap! slap! slap!'; the four attendants were like, I slap once, you slap once, they kept slapping that dog official. Turned out the old thief pushed and steered the four attendants' arms, while transmitting his own strength, so that those four men's palms were slapping the dog official. In just a short moment, the dog official's cheeks were swollen red." Wei Xiaobao burst out in laughter again, but he turned his head around, he did not dare to look at Bai Hanfeng.

Su Gang nodded, "That Xu *Xiong* has earned the nickname ‘Eight-armed Ape’. I heard his *qin na* skill is considered first class in Wulin; his reputation is indeed fully justified." He thought that since Bai Hansong died in his hands, naturally this

old man's martial art skill was very high. By praising his martial art skill, he was trying to preserve the two brothers of the Bai family's prestige.

Bai Hanfeng said, "*Gege* and I were amused; very soon we saw blood dripping from the dog official's cheeks. There were many onlookers in the wine shop standing to see the excitement. The old thief kept yelling loudly, 'Don't hit, don't hit! *Da Laoye* must not be hit! You are such brazen servants, underlings defy your superior, how can you beat your own *Da Laoye*?' while he skipped and bounced around behind the four attendants, very much like a big monkey. When pushing the attendant's arm, it looked like he was dodging instead. The onlookers could not see that he was playing a trick. It was not until that dog official fainted and fell down on the floor that he stopped and returned to his table. The four attendants still thought that they had bumped into some demon or meet some ghosts; they simply did not understand how they were beating their own *Da Laoye*, but the blood on their palms was real. The four of them stared blankly for a moment, and then they carried that dog official away."

"Delighted, delighted!" Fan Gang said, "Wu Sangui's lackeys should be punished like that. Xu *San Ge* beating that dog official thoroughly is precisely to vent the resentment of all common people in the world. Bai *Er Xia*, why didn't you help him with several beatings of your own?"

Immediately Bai Hanfeng's anger rose up again, he shouted loudly, "It was obvious that old thief was flaunting his skill, why would I want to help him? It was he who did the beating, not him taking a beating."

Xuanzhen said, "Bai *Er Xia* is right, previously he did not know Xu *San Ge* knew martial art; didn't he stand up bravely for the truth by blocking those dog official's attendants from assaulting him?"

"Humph!" Bai Hanfeng snorted, and then continued, "After that dog official and his attendants left, my *Gege* called the restaurant's shopkeeper and told him that he would compensate for all damaged tables, chairs and utensils, he also told him to put the old thief's bill into our account. The old thief laughed and thanked him. My *Gege* invited him over to drink wine together with us. In a low voice the old thief said, 'I have long admired the illustrious name of Song and Feng, virtuous brothers. It's nice to meet you.' *Gege* and I were startled, thinking that it turned out he had already known our origins, but we did not know who he was. My *Gege* said, 'I am very ashamed, may I ask *Laoyezi*'s respected surname and great given name?' The old thief said with a laugh, '*Zaixia* Xu Tianchuan. Unable to keep my calm, I have shown off my meager skill in front of virtuous brothers' expert eyes; it was truly laughable.' By that time we still did not know what kind of man was this Xu Tianchuan, but we thought that since he had given a dog official some beatings, obviously he was someone who tread the same path as we do. If that dog official did not suffer those trashing, we, two brothers, would certainly give him some beatings ourselves. The three of us drank and chatted, we got along very well with each other. Since it was not convenient to have an in depth conversation in the restaurant, we invited him over here to have a meal."

"Oh," Fan Gang said, "So Xu *San Ge* came here? Was it in your respected abode that the fight started?"

"Who says we fought here?" Bai Hanfeng said, "How can we fight with a guest in our home? Isn't that we are bullying others?"

Xuanzhen nodded and said, "The Bai brothers have heroic spirit and chivalrous frame of mind, definitely they won’t do such thing.”

Hearing Xuanzhen repeatedly praised him, eventually Bai

Hanfeng nodded to him to express his gratitude. He said, “We, brothers invited the old thief to come here, we treated him with utmost respect, we asked him how he recognized us. He no longer conceal anything, he said that he belong to Tian Di Hui, as soon as we, brothers, arrived in Beijing, Tian Di Hui had already obtained the news, and that he longed to make friends with us. He beat the dog official in the restaurant, first, it was because he detests Wu Sangui, second, it was because he wanted to make friends with us. That old thief can talk really well, he deceived us, brothers, into thinking that he was a really good man. Afterwards we were speaking about fighting the Qing to restore the Ming. The more we talked, the three of us, no, two people and a dog, grew more in agreement with each other …”

Wei Xiaobao interjected, “Two people and a dog talked and grew more in agreement with each other is a very rare occurrence.” The others could not help feeling amused, but in front of Bai Hanfeng, they did not dare to laugh loudly.

Bai Hanfeng shouted angrily, “Little demon, you talk rubbish!”

“Bai *Er Xia*,” Fan Gang said, “Although Wei *Xiangzhu* is young, he is our Society’s Green Wood Hall *Xiangzhu*; everybody in our Society, from top to bottom, respects him very much.”

“So what if he is a *Xiangzhu*?” Bai Hanfeng said.

Su Gang tried to change the subject. “My Bai *Xiongdi* is deeply grieved by the death of his older brother, his speech is somewhat pressing with rage, I am asking everybody not to take offense. Wei *Xiangzhu*, please bear with him a little bit.” He thought that in Tian Di Hui, the *Xiangzhu* status was not a small matter; by calling him ‘little demon’, Bai Hanfeng was clearly in the wrong.

Bai Hanfeng was not a fool, he understood this subtle hint; averting his gaze from Wei Xiaobao he said, "Afterwards, the

three of us ..."

"No, the two of you and a dog," Wei Xiaobao butted in again.

"You ... you ..." Bai Hanfeng angrily screamed. But in the end he was able to control his temper. Taking a deep breath he continued, "When the topic of our discussion reached fighting the Qing restoring the Ming, we talked about after the Tatars are wiped clean, we will support Emperor Hongwu's descendant to sit of the dragon throne. My *Gege* said, 'His Majesty returned to heaven in Myanmar, he was survived by the young crown prince. Contrary to what one might expect, he is actually very intelligent, wise and farsighted, and will make a brave ruler; presently he lives in seclusion in a remote mountain.' But that old thief said, 'The rightful emperor ordained by heaven is alive and well in Taiwan.'"

As soon as Bai Hanfeng quoted Xu Tianchuan, Su Gang, Yao Chun, Wang Wutong, and the others knew the disagreement between the two parties was over supporting Gui and supporting Tang. After the Emperor Suizhen hanged himself on Mount Mei and the Qing army crossed the pass, the members of Ming Dynasty's imperial clan, King Fu, King Tang, King Lu and King Gui separately proclaimed themselves as Emperors in different places, the dispute had already started at that time. After each one of these Kings died, the followers of these kings still harbored hostility toward each other.

Bai Hanfeng continued, "When I heard the old thief spoke those words, I asked, 'Since when did our young emperor go to Taiwan?' The old thief said, 'I was talking about Son of Heaven Longwu's young emperor, not King Gui's offspring.' My *Gege* said, 'Xu *Laoyezi*, you are a hero and a warrior, the two of us brothers admire you very much, it's just that concerning an important matter of the world, your experience is actually lacking. When the Son of Heaven Suizhen died, King Fu stood on his own feet. When King Fu was taken prisoner by the Qing

army, King Tang was unfortunate and died for his country. Our Son of Heaven Yongli was the king over the whole China. After the Son of Heaven Yongli died for his country, naturally his offspring will succeed the throne.'" Longwu was King Tang's regnal name, Yongli was King Gui's regnal name. They were all King Tang, King Gui's former officials, naturally they were addressing their former masters by their regnal names.

Listening to this point, Fan Gang interrupted, "*Bai Er Xia*, please don't be offended. After the Son of Heaven Longwu perished, all his other brothers died, he still has a sibling Son of Heaven Shaowu in Guangzhou. Yet King Gui dispatched troops to attack Son of Heaven Shaowu. They were all descendants of *Taizu Huangdi*, not fighting Manchu Tatars but fighting one's own, isn't that a big mistake, a blunder?"

Bai Hanfeng angrily said, "Wasn't the way that old thief speak identical to yours? In the end, whose dispute is this? Our Son of Heaven Yongli properly sent an envoy to Guangzhou, ordering King Tang to remove his honorific title. Not only King Tang refuse to accept the imperial order, he sent troops to oppose the 'Mandate of Heaven' instead. This action of King Tang was obviously in rebellion, a treason and heresy; it can be said that it was the main cause of a disaster."

With a cold laugh Fan Gang said, "An insignificant *Zaixia* was also involved in the battle of Sanshui, but I don't know whose army was completely wiped-out?"

Bai Hanfeng was furious, he stood up and with a stern voice said, "Are you still considering this old debt?"

Listening to the way Fan Gang spoke, Wei Xiaobao knew that apparently in the Battle of Sanshui, King Tang won and King Gui lost; he busily asked, "Fan *Dage*, what happened in that Battle of Sanshui?"

Fan Gang said, "King Gui has listened to his subordinate's

instigation, a treacherous court official's, a servant called Lin Guiding, hence he dispatched troops to attack Guangzhou ..."

"Fan Dage," Su Gang interrupted, "That was not the fact. It was King Tang who sent troops first to attack Zhaoqing, our Son of Heaven Yongli had no choice but to rise to take up the challenge."

Both sides were like, you make a brief remark, I speak one sentence; they all argued over old affair, gradually the swords were drawn, an open fight was about to begin. Yao Chun repeatedly shook his hands and with a loud voice said, "It's an old affair of many years ago, do you still have to bring it up? It doesn't matter who won who lost, there's really no glory or shame in that, in the end it did not wipe out the Tatars." As soon as they heard this, they stopped arguing, all had ashamed look on their faces.

Su Gang said, "Bai *Er Di*, justice is to be found everywhere, pledging our lives, we will contend strongly for the source of right and wrong. What happened afterwards?"

Bai Hanfeng said, "What that old thief said is similar to what this ... this Master Fan said just now, naturally we, brothers, discussed it in details to make him understand. Both sides were getting louder and louder, nobody was willing to yield. In his anger, my *Gege* slapped the small side table and broke it into pieces. With a cold laugh the old thief said, 'After you can't win the argument using reason, now you want to resort to violence? The Twin-tree of Bai family of the Mu Palace's fame for fighting prowess shakes the distant land, I am but a peon in Tian Di Hui, yet I am not scared.' Obviously he was saying that a peon of Tian Di Hui outshines established and well-known characters of the Mu Palace. My *Gege* said, 'I broke my own table, what does it have to do with you? On what authority you dare to insult our Mu Palace?' The argument reached a deadlock, finally we agreed to have a duel that same night on *zi*

hour [between 11pm - 1am] at the Temple of Heaven."

Su Gang sighed, low-spiritedly he said, "Turns out the dispute started from that."

Bai Hanfeng said, "That night we went to the Temple of Heaven to keep the appointment. Without saying anything we started fighting with that old thief right away ..."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Presumably it was two against one. I wonder was it Bai *Da Xia* who fought first, or was it Bai *Er Xia*?"

Bai Hanfeng's face turned red, with a loud voice he said, "We, two brothers, always fight together. Dealing with one person the two of us fought together, dealing with a hundred people the two of us still fought together."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "So that's how it is," he said, "Supposing you are fighting with me, a child, the two of you would still fight together."

Bai Hanfeng roared in rage, he raised his palm, ready to smash it down onto the top of Wei Xiaobao's head. Su Gang stretched out his left hand to grab Bai Hanfeng's wrist; he said, "Bai *Er Di*, don't!"

Bai Hanfeng shouted, "This ... this little demon insulted my deceased brother."

Wei Xiaobao was only seeking to win a tongue-lashing contest; he had not thought that he had included the dead Bai Hansong. Seeing Bai Hanfeng was raging mad, he was very scared and did not dare to see anything anymore.

"Bai *Er Di*," Su Gang said, "Injustice has a reason, debt has its owner. It was the one surnamed Xu who murdered Bai *Dage*, we can only seek that surnamed Xu to settle the account."

Bai Hanfeng stared maliciously at Wei Xiaobao. "There will come a day where I will pull your tendon and peel your skin," he said.

Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue toward him, he thought that with Su Gang around, Bai Hanfeng would not do anything to him. Even if he was going to pull his tendon and peel his skin, it would not be today's matter.

Fan Gang said, "Su *Si Ge*, you said that Bai Da Xia was murdered by our Xu *Dage*, I am afraid you must reconsider the word 'murder'. Bai *Er Xia* said that both parties were contending martial art in the Temple of Heaven, Xu *Dage* fought one against two, there was no conspiracy or treacherous scheming, and it wasn't relying on number to achieve victory either, it was a just and honorable fight, how can you say that it was 'murder'?"

Bai Hanfeng angrily said, "Naturally my *Gege* was murdered by that old thief. Before we, brothers, went to the Temple of Heaven to keep the appointment, we have discussed it over; my *Gege* said that although this old man was muddle-headed, did not understand the mandate of heaven and unwilling to surrender, he was after all a compatriot in fighting the Qing restoring the Ming. During the duel, we must consider Tian Di Hui's part and must stop at the touch, we must not injure him for real. The two of us were being lenient, who would have thought that the old thief was so vicious, unexpectedly he launched a killer strike and thus murdered my *Gege*."

Su Gang asked, "How did that surnamed Xu murder Bai *Da Di*?"

Bai Hanfeng said, "We fought for more than forty stances without any clear winner or loser. Suddenly that old thief jumped out of the arena; he cupped his fist and said, 'My utmost admiration! Today we cannot distinguish victory and defeat, there is no need to continue fighting. Mu Palace's martial art is world-renowned, it is indeed brilliant.'"

"That's very good," Fan Gang said, "Everybody did not need to fight anymore, hence avoided injuring friendship, wasn't it

great?”

Bai Hanfeng angrily said, “You did not see that old thief’s expression when he said that, how can you say that he really had good intention? There was a cold smile on the corners of his mouth, obviously he was saying that with one against two, the Bai Family Twin-tree of the Mu Palace cannot overcome an old man; that ‘world-renowned martial art skill’ was nothing more than a brag. Naturally I was angry, I said, ‘If victory or defeat cannot be distinguished, then we continue fighting until victory and defeat are clearly distinguished.’ Although that old man was agile, his strength could not be compared to us, brothers. In prolonged fight, he would definitely lose. He did not want to fight just so he could slip away. Thereupon we fought again. After fighting for a while, I launched the move ‘dragon soars tiger leaps’, I struck down on him from the air. Sure enough, that old thief leaned sideways to evade. The two of us had practiced this move well, my *Gege* immediately launched the ‘sweeping away a thousand army’, his left leg swept to the right, his right arm struck across to the left, so he would not be able to evade.” Speaking about this part, he demonstrated the move ‘sweeping away a thousand army’.

Priest Xuanzhen nodded and said, “This move is a converging attack, blocking the opponent from dodging either to the left of to the right; it is indeed formidable."

Bai Hanfeng said, "The old thief pulled his body back, suddenly he struck toward my *Gege*'s chest. My *Gege* flipped his palms and pushed the upper part of the old thief's torso, while laughing, 'Ha ha, you lost ...' Right this moment, 'crash!' unexpectedly the old thief was very ruthless, he had used a heavy hand. Knowing the situation was disadvantageous, I launched the 'high mountain flowing water', with both palms, one after another, striking the old thief's back. The old thief's body shook and he retreated a few steps. My *Gege* spurted a

mouthful of fresh blood and fell sitting down on the ground. I was very anxious and busily helped him up. The old thief let out several hollow laughs; limping and dragging his legs he walked away. I was thinking of running after him and giving him several punches to kill him instantly, but I was worried about my *Gege*'s injury and did not have time to pay attention to that old thief. I carried *Gege* back home; on the way home, he only said four words, 'avenge me' [gei wo bao chou], then breathed his last. Su *Si Ge* ... if we don't avenge his death, we would live in vain!" Speaking to this point, tears welling up his eyes.

Priest Xuanzhen turned his head toward a man by his side, "Feng *Er Di*, let us demonstrate several stances that Bai *Er Xia* mentioned just now."

The man surnamed Feng was Feng Jizhong; there was nothing remarkable about his appearance, if anything, he looked rather boorish. Ever since Wei Xiaobao saw him in the basement of the Hui Chun Tang drug store the previous day, he had never said a word; so Wei Xiaobao did not pay him any attention.

Feng Jizhong nodded his head and stood up, then light as a feather, he sent out a palm strike toward Xuanzhen. Xuanzhen raised his left palm to block, then he pulled his body back. Next, he formed a pair of claws with all ten fingers, remarkably alike a monkey's claws; obviously he was imitating the ‘Eight-armed Ape’ Xu Tianchuan's style. Pushing the ground lightly with his left foor, Feng Jizhong flew up and then from the air he struck down.

"Good move!" Yao Chun called out, "It's the ‘dragon soars tiger leaps’!" Before he even finished, Xuanzhen had already leaned sideways to evade.

Right this moment, Feng Jizhong swiftly moved in front of Xuanzhen's body; with his left leg he swept across to the right, with his right arm he swept across to the left. It was exactly the ‘sweeping away a thousand army’ Bai Hanfeng had

demonstrated just a moment ago. Feng Jizhong was able to move as if he was two people. He had just finished executed Bai Hanfeng's ‘dragon soars tiger leaps’, immediately he changed into a different role and attacked Xuanzhen from the front, executing Bai Hansong's ‘sweeping away a thousand army’. His movements were very fast; it was truly unthinkable. Amid the cheer of everybody present, Xuanzhen shrank back while striking the opponent's chest. Feng Jizhong pushed with both palms toward the pit of Xuanzhen's stomach, while saying, "Haha, you lost ..." Then right this moment Xuanzhen sent a right punch toward the pit of Feng Jizhong's stomach, and a left palm strike toward his lower abdomen. As soon as both men's fists and palms touched each other, they froze.

"Bai *Er Xia*," Xuanzhen asked, "Isn't the situation at that time like this?"

Before Bai Hanfeng could answer, Feng Jizhong flashed toward Xuanzhen's back; from the right side of his face, both palms hacked down as he made a motion to attack Xuanzhen's back. "High mountain flowing water!" he said. These two palms did not touch Xuanzhen's body at all; before everybody realized what had happened, he had already stood up in front of Xuanzhen's body, with both palms pressed against the pit of Xuanzhen's stomach, while letting Xuanzhen's fist to rest on his own lower abdomen, resuming the former position.

These two men come and go so fast just like ghosts. Other than Wei Xiaobao, those who were present were all experienced and knowledgeable, yet they had never seen anything like Feng Jizhong’s unbelievable speed and agility. In their astonishment, they understood the intention of this demonstration. When fighting one against two, Xu Tianchuan was in an extremely dangerous situation; if he was being somewhat lenient toward Bai Hansong, perhaps it would be difficult for him to escape Bai Hanfeng’s ‘high mountain flowing water’ attack on his back.

Xuanzhen said again, “Bai *Er Xia*, isn't the situation at that time like this?”

Bai Hanfeng’s face was ash-grey, he slowly nodded. Feng Jizhong’s movements were like diving falcon, his speed made everybody dizzy, but the way he imitated the styles used by the brothers was without any mistake, exactly like the way Bai Hanfeng’s Shifu taught those techniques. The three stances, ‘dragon soars tiger leaps’, ‘high mountain flowing water’ and ‘sweeping away a thousand army’ were well-known styles of ‘Mu Family Fist’, which had spread all over the world, there were many people who knew these styles. It was not strange that Feng Jizhong was able to use it; but one person executing all three stances masterfully and with such speed from beginning to end, was indeed rarely seen. Moreover, each movement was very clear, each technique each style was executed perfectly; even though the two brothers had practiced the ‘Mu Family Fist’ all their lives, they still fell short by a wide margin.

Feng Jizhong pulled back his palms and said, “Priest, please remove your Taoist robe, forgive my offense!”

Xuanzhen was startled, he did not understand Feng Jizhong’s intention, but he followed his instruction anyway. Taking his Taoist robe off, he shook it lightly, and suddenly two piece of cloth, in the shape of a palm, fluttered down from the Taoist robe, as two palm-shaped holes appeared on the pit of the stomach of the Taoist robe. Turned out just now Feng Jizhong had shaken and tore the Taoist robe with his palm strength. Xuanzhen could not restrain his countenance from changing; involuntarily he held up his hand to the pit of his stomach, thinking that since Feng Jizhong’s palm strength had shaken his soft Taoist robe, he himself must have had suffered an internal injury. But after tracing around the pit of his stomach, he did not feel anything unusual.

Feng Jizhong said, “The inherent power carried on Bai *Da Xia*’s

palm was far stronger than mine. Xu *Dage* had already received serious internal injury on the pit of his stomach; added to that, he also received the two palm blows on his back from the 'high mountain flowing water'. I am afraid his life is difficult to protect."

The people saw how Feng Jizhong was using a 'yin' and soft palm strength to cut two palm prints on Xuanzhen's Taoist robe; this kind of power was more astonishing than his ability to simulate two persons at once, attacking from the front and the rear at the same time, which he demonstrated just a moment ago. Without exception they were all overwhelmed with amazement that they even forgot to cheer.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "That day the old turtle Hai also cut a palm print on the chest of my gown, perhaps he was also using the same trick."

Su Gang and Bai Hanfeng looked at each other with dismayed expressions. They saw how Feng Jizhong's level of martial art was far above either one of theirs. Also, with this demonstration, it appeared that although Xu Tianchuan had used a heavy hand and killed people, it was out of desperation where he did not have any other choice; he was under a converging attack from the Bai brothers and had to do everything in his power to defend himself, hence he could not be regarded to be in the wrong. Su Gang stood up and said, "This Master Feng has such a superior martial art skill and has really expanded *Zaixia*'s horizon today. If our Bai *Da Di* had Master Feng's level of martial art, he couldn't be killed by that surnamed Xu."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Bai *Da Xia*'s martial art skill was extremely high, everyone in Jianghu knows; Su *Si Ge* does not need to be polite." Bai Hanfeng shot him a malicious look, but he could not say that his own brother's martial art skill was no good. Wei Xiaobao also said, "Bai *Er Xia*'s martial art skill is also very high,

everybody in Jianghu knows."

Fan Gang was afraid Wei Xiaobao might speak more nonsense and would create more side issues; he cupped his fist toward Su Gang and Bai Hanfeng and said, "We have disturbed you enough today, we'll take our leave."

"Wait a moment!" Xuanzhen said, "We must go to Bai *Da Xia*'s presence and kowtow. This matter is indeed … ay, the mention of it will make everybody's heart grieved; we must not harm the friendship between the Mu Palace and Tian Di Hui." Finished speaking, he took a step toward the rear hall.

Bai Hanfeng held up his hands to block, and said fiercely, "My *Gege* died without his eyes closed, I don't need your hypocritical courtesy."

"Bai *Er Xia*," Xuanzhen said, "Not to mention that it was a slip in a martial art competition and thus Bai *Da Xia* was accidentally injured, even if it were our Xu *Dage*'s fault, you cannot hate the entire Tian Di Hui. We are bowing in front of the departed spirit, it is to show *yi qi* to the fellow Wulin character of the same principle."

"The Priest is right," Su Gang said, "Bai *Er Di*, we must not fail to show courtesy."

Immediately Wei Xiaobao, Xuanzhen, Fan Gang, Feng Jizhong, Yao Chun, Ma Boren, and the others kowtowed in front of Bai Hansong's coffin together. While kowtowing, Wei Xiaobao was muttering to himself. He kowtowed three times, and then stood up. Bai Hanfeng asked sternly, "What did you say just now?"

"I was praying quietly," Wei Xiaobao said, "I was speaking to Bai *Da Xia*'s spirit in heaven, what does it concern you?"

Bai Hanfeng said, "Your words were not clear, what did you pray?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "I said, 'Bai *Da Xia*, it's alright for you to

depart one step sooner. *Zaixia* Wei Xiaobao was beaten black and blue by your brother, I won't live much longer, in a few days I am going to the netherworld and will meet you, Senior."

"When did I ever beat you?" Bai Hanfeng asked.

Wei Xiaobao pulled up his sleeve to show his right wrist. It was swollen and turned into a black and purple circle, the finger marks were clearly visible. It was precisely the injury from Bai Hanfeng's pinch a while ago. He said, "Isn't this from your beating?"

Su Gang cast a glance toward Bai Hanfeng; seeing he did not deny, Su Gang's face revealed a slight blaming expression. He turned toward Wei Xiaobao and said, "Wei *Xiangzhu*, this matter is hard to explain in a few words. Let's discuss it slowly at a later date."

"I am afraid my heavy injury is incurable that I will die soon," Wei Xiaobao said, "There won't be any later date for me to talk."

Su Gang could see that Wei Xiaobao could speak freely without any sign of internal injury; he knew Wei Xiaobao was just acting up. He thought, "How could Tian Di Hui have a young rascal like this as a *Xiangzhu*?" He said, "Wei *Xiangzhu* will live a long life reaching hundreds of years. When everybody else here has died, you will still live for a few dozen years."

"Right now my stomach feels as if it was twisted," Wei Xiaobao said, "My five solid and six hollow organs[105] are all turned upside down; I don't know if I'll live until tomorrow. Feng *Er Ge*, Priest Xuanzhen, if I die, I don't want you to find Bai *Er Xia* to seek revenge. In Jianghu, we uphold *yi qi* above everything else, we must not harm the friendship between the Mu Palace and Tian Di Hui."

Su Gang frowned, he sent everybody off outside the gate.

Xuanzhen expressed his gratitude to Ma Boren, Yao Chun, Lei Yixiao and Wang Wutong, four people; he cupped his fist and took his leave. The Tian Di Hui entourage returned to the Return of Spring drugstore.

As they reached the door, they knew something was amiss; the sales counter collapsed, the hundred plus small drawers in the drug store, as well as the drug ingredients, were scattered all over the floor. They all rushed in and called out several times, but there was no reply. When they reached the inner hall, they saw the fat shopkeeper and two shop assistants were lying dead on the floor. This drug store was located in a remote area, temporarily there were no curious onlookers congregating outside.

Xuanzhen ordered Gao Yanchao, "Bar the door, don't let unconcerned people come in. We'll quickly look for Xu *San Ge*."

Pulling the trap door on the floor, they rushed into the basement, while calling out, "Xu *San Ge*, Xu *San Ge*!" But the basement was completely empty. Xu Tianchuan had disappeared without a trace.

"His granny," Fan Gang yelled angrily, "We'll stake everything to fight those thieves from the Mu Palace to the death!"

Xuanzhen said, "Quickly invite Wang *Zongbiaotou* and the others to come and be our witnesses. If the Mu Palace wanted to kill Xu *San Ge*, they would have done it here. Since he was taken captive, they would not harm him immediately." Thereupon they dispatched a messenger to invite Wang Wutong, Yao Chun, and the others, four people, to come.

Seeing the condition at which the fat shopkeeper died, Wang Wutong and the others were angered; they all said, "We mustn't delay, let's go immediately to Willow Tree Lane to demand for his return." Right away they all trooped back to the Willow Tree Lane.

Bai Hanfeng opened the door, “Why are gentlemen back?” he coldly asked.

Fan Gang said in loud voice, “Bai *Er Xia*, why ask when you already know? This kind of despicable act will only make the Mu Palace lose face even more.”

“Lose what face?” Bai Hanfeng angrily said, “What despicable act?”

Fan Gang said, “Where is our Xu *San Ge*? Quickly hand him out. You people took advantage of our unguarded moment, you killed three shop assistants of our Return of Spring Hall drugstore; it was truly the lowest of low.”

“Nonsense!” Bai Hanfeng shouted, “What Return of Spring Hall? What Return of Autumn Hall? What three shop assistants?”

Hearing the commotion, Su Gang went out and asked, “Gentlemen have left and now are back, I wonder what instruction do you have for me?”

“Su *Si Xia*,” Lei Yixiao said, “In this matter, you are in the wrong. Right or wrong cannot escape public opinion, even if you wanted to take revenge, you cannot randomly kill innocent people. If this matter spread out over the Capital, the implication may not be small.”

“What are they talking about?” Su Gang asked Bai Hanfeng.

“Who would know?” Bai Hanfeng replied, “I can’t make head or tail of it.”

Wang Wutong said, “Su *Si Xia*, Bai *Er Xia*, in the place where Tian Di Hui took residence, three shop assistants have been murdered, Xu Tianchuan has also been kidnapped. About the right or wrong of this matter, we may talk it over later, but for now, please look at our faces and release Master Xu first.”

Su Gang was puzzled, “Xu Tianchuan has been kidnapped?”

he asked, “That’s really strange! You must be suspecting us as the culprit, we were together in here, could it be that we know the technique of doing several things at the same time?”

Fan Gang said, “Naturally you sent someone else to do the job, what’s so difficult about that?”

“There is nothing I can do if you don’t believe me,” Su Gang said, “If you want to come in and search, please be my guest.”

Bai Hanfeng loudly said, “Divine Physician Hermit Su Gang, Su *Si Ge* always say one as one and two as two; when have he ever said half an empty word? Let me tell you frankly: if that old thief surnamed Xu ever fall into our hands, I will right away cut his body in two; who would have the patience of kidnapping him and nurturing him by wasting our rice?”

Su Gang muttered hesitantly, “I am afraid there is something else behind this. *Zaixia* is being presumptuous here, but I am thinking of going to your precious Society’s residence to have a look, I wonder if I may?”

Seeing these two people’s expression did not show any deceit, temporarily Xuanzhen and the others were unsure of what to do. Fan Gang said, “Su *Si Xia*, we all want you to give us your word: is our Xu Tianxhuan, Xu *San Ge*, in your hands or not?”

Su Gang shook his head, “He is not,” he said, “I can also guarantee that our Bai *Er Di* has nothing to do with this matter.” Su Gang had a resounding reputation in Wulin, everyone knew he was an upright and just warrior; if he said he did not kidnap Xu Tianchuan, it must be the truth.

Xuanzhen said, “In that case, I invite the two of you to have a look at our humble residence. Wei *Xiangzhu*, what do you think?”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “You invited others to have a look first before asking me ‘what I think’.” He said, “Whatever Priest said, let it be done that way. After all, we have three people who

were killed; we can ask these two gentlemen to kowtow several times to apologize, that is only proper.”

Su Gang and Bai Hanfeng stared at him; they both thought, “You, little demon, flatly accuse us as the killer of your three people.”

They returned to the Return of Spring drugstore. Su Gang and Bai Hanfeng examined the bodies of the fat shopkeeper and the two drugstore assistants carefully; they were beaten to death, the pit of their stomachs collapsed and their ribs broken. The technique used was ordinary, it was not the work of martial artists of any school.

Bai Hanfeng said, “All of us must investigate this matter and bring it to light, otherwise we will suffer an unredressed injustice.”

“Suffering an unredressed injustice is not a big deal,” Su Gang said, “Someday the truth will come to light. It’s just that Xu *Dage* has fallen into the enemy’s hands, we must think of a way to rescue him as soon as possible.”

Everybody inspected the drugstore from front to rear, and top to bottom, they also scrutinized the basement, but did not find the least bit of clue. The sky had darkened; Su Gang, Bai Hanfeng, Wang Wutong and the others took their leave to return home. They agreed to separately investigate this matter within the Beijing city walls.

Fan Gang said, “Su *Si Xia*, Bai *Er Xia*, have you looked everything clearly? At midnight tonight, we will send someone to set this building on fire, to destroy the bodies and leave no trace.”

Su Gang nodded. “I have looked everything clearly,” he said, “Luckily the neighboring area is uninhabited. It’s good that you are going to burn the store down, to avoid the authorities making any inquiry.”

After Su Gang and Bai Hanfeng left, the Green Wood Hall people had a lengthy discussion, they all agreed that Xu Tianchuan must be kidnapped by people from the Mu Palace; otherwise how could it happened exactly, not too long after, and not earlier than, after he killed someone from the opposite side, Xu Tianchuan disappeared without any trace? At most Su Gang and Bai Hanfeng, two people, did not know about it. Afterwards they discussed how they were going to set the house on fire. When Wei Xiaobao heard they were going to send someone to start the fire, he got very excited.

Xuanzhen said, "Wei *Xiangzhu*, it's getting late. You must hurry back to the Palace. We are sending someone to start the fire, it is not an important thing, Wei *Xiangzhu* does not need to be here to manage the general situation; it may be assumed that nothing will go wrong."

Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "Priest, we all are brothers, no need to flatter me. Although Wei Xiaobao is filling for the damn *Xiangzhu* position, in term of martial art skill and knowledge and experience, how can I surpass everybody here, Wulin experts? I want to stay here just to see the excitement, nothing more than that."

On the surface, these people were polite to him, but seeing his young age and how he made a fool of himself at the Bai family home, in reality they were rather looking down upon him. What he said actually cheer them up; those words had set the people's hearts free from worry. Although their respect toward this young *Xiangzhu* did not increase, they felt several notches closer to him than before.

Xuanzhen laughed and said, "It would be in the middle of the night before we start the fire, and we still have to contain the fire so that it won't spread to neighboring houses. If Wei *Xiangzhu* does not return to the Palace for the entire night, I am afraid it would not be too convenient."

Wei Xiaobao thought what he said actually made sense. The Palace gate was closed as soon as it was dark, nobody could get in or out. He was the young emperor's favorite, everybody in the Palace had their eyes on him, if he violated the prohibition of spending the night outside, the charge against him would not be small. He could only sigh and said, "What a pity, what a pity! It would be extremely fun if I could be the one started the fire."

In a low voice Gao Yanchao said, "When in the future we burn other people's house during the daytime, we will definitely respectfully invite Wei *Xiangzhu* to start the fire."

Wei Xiaobao was delighted; he grabbed Gao Yanchao's hand and said, "Gao *Dage*, a real man gave his words, you … you must not forget."

Gao Yanchao smiled and said, "The matter that Wei *Xiangzhu* orders, how can subordinate dare not to obey?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "How about tomorrow we go to the Willow Tree Lane and set the Bai family home on fire?"

Gao Yanchao jumped in fright; he hastily said, "We must give it further thought before making a decision. If *Zongduozhu* finds out, most likely he would blame us."

Instantly Wei Xiaobao's excitement abated; he changed back into his little eunuch attire. Gao Yanchao wrapped his new clothes, shoes and cap into a bundle and handed it over to him. They all looked around carefully, and after ascertaining that there were no people from the Mu Palace spying on them, they went out as a group with Wei Xiaobao in the middle to the side street, and then hiring a small sedan chair they sent him back to the Palace. Wei Xiaobao nodded to the brothers and climbed into the sedan chair. Gao Yanchao put the bundle of clothes and cap into the sedan chair. A Society brother stepped forward to the sedan chair and stuck his head inside; with a low voice he said, "Wei *Xiangzhu*, early tomorrow morning, it would be best

if you could go to the Catering Department kitchen and take a look.”

“Take a look at what?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“Nothing important,” the man replied, as he pulled his head back and withdrew.

Wei Xiaobao could not remember his name, this man had a pair of rat moustache slanting to the side and a cunning face. The marketplace was full of small traders like this. He did not come with them to the Willow Tree Lane, Wei Xiaobao had always thought that he was one of the shop assistants. He wondered why that man asked him to go to the Catering Department kitchen the next day.

In any case, inspecting the kitchen was precisely his responsibility, so early morning the next day, he just went. As soon as their immediate supervisor arrived, the eunuchs working in the kitchen, from the supervisors down to kitchen workers, were all busy serving him tea and delicacy. Wei Xiaobao ate several pieces of light refreshment and said, “The light refreshments you make in here is not bad, but it will be better if you learn some more from Yangzhou chefs.”

“Yes, yes,” the eunuch supervisor busily said, “If not for Wei Gong-gong giving directions, we may not really understand.” [Translator’s note: I thought up to this moment Wei Xiaobao was still known as Gui Gong-gong, but both the book and the online text have Wei Gong-gong.]

Seeing nothing unusual in the kitchen, Wei Xiaobao was about to go back to his room when he saw the eunuch in charge of purchasing returned from the marketplace, he was followed by a man with a shoulder pole in his hand. The man chuckled and said, “Yes, yes, yes, yes, just do whatever Gong-gong says, you can’t go wrong, guaranteed.”

When Wei Xiaobao saw this man, he was shocked, because it

was the same man who told him to go to the kitchen. The eunuch in charge of purchasing hurriedly went over to Wei Xiaobao to pay his respect. Pointing to the man, Wei Xiaobao asked, “Who is this?”

The eunuch in charge of purchasing said with a laugh, “This is Boss Qian of the Qian Xinglong Meat Farmstead of Beicheng[106] disctrict. Today he came especially to flatter us by delivering more than a dozen fresh pigs personally to the Palace.” Turning toward Boss Qian, he said, “Old Qian, you are very lucky today. This is Gui Gong-gong, our Catering Department Manager, currently he is the number one favorite of His Majesty. We are serving in the Palace, yet we cannot casually see the Senior’s face. Your three generation ancestors must have had tapped wooden fish[107] that by lucky coincidence you get to see Gui Gong-gong.”

Boss Qian kneeled down and kowtowed several times to Wei Xiaobao, saying, “Gong-gong is the one *Xiaoren* depends upon for our livelihood; only today by fate I can pay my respect, it is truly because the one surnamed Qian’s ancestor has amassed virtues.”

“No need to be overly courteous,” Wei Xiaobao said, while thinking, “What is he doing, sneaking into the Palace like that? Why didn’t he tell me in advance?”

Boss Qian stood up with a face full of smile, he said, “It is the Gong-gong of the Palace who make my business succeed. My price is especially low, I can’t say that I make any profit; however, serving meat to His Majesty, Princesses, and other royalties has given me an enormous face, when other people heard that even His Majesty ate the meat I offered, naturally my pork became number one in the world, no other meat business is able to surpass it. As a result, in only more than a year serving meat to the Palace, Qian Xinglong Meat

Farmstead's business has grown several times over. It is all due to all Gong-gong patronizing my business." While saying that he repeatedly bowed to pay his respect.

Wei Xiaobao nodded, he laughed and said, "You must be very rich then!"

The man said, "It's all due to Gong-gong's great fortune." He pulled two banknotes from his pocket, with a grin he said, "Mere trifle, inadequate to show my appreciation; would Gong-gong please keep it to bestow reward to your subordinates." Finished speaking, he handed the banknotes over to Wei Xiaobao with both hands.

Wei Xiaobao took the banknotes and looked, each banknote worth five hundred *taels* of silver, altogether there were one thousand *taels*; it was none other than the money he gave Gao Yanchao and the others the other day. Wei Xiaobao was slightly startled; he saw Boss Qian twisted his mouth toward the eunuch in charge of purchasing. Wei Xiaobao understood his intention; with a laugh he said, "Boss Qian is too polite!" He handed the banknotes over to the eunuch manager and said with a laugh, "Just divide Boss Qian's present among the boys, no need to give me any share."

Seeing the thousand *taels* banknotes, the eunuchs were overjoyed at this unexpected fortune. Normally, the suppliers of pork, lamb, beef, poultry, fish and produce to the Palace would give them commission on a regular basis, and then some more during Chinese New Year or other festivities, but the gift was never more than four, five hundred *taels*, which the eunuch head of the Catering Department Manager would take more than half first. This time not only the commission was of a substantial amount, Wei Xiaobao also said that he did not want any share. When they divided the money, how could it not be a small undeserved fortune for each of them? However, the eunuch supervisor thought that when Gui Gong-gong in the

mouth said he did not want it, it might be that he was only putting on airs in front of outsiders; he was the head, how could he waive his share just like that? Therefore, when he calculated everybody's share, he set aside the largest share to be given to Wei Xiaobao later.

Boss Qian said, "Gui Gong-gong, you showed this kind of empathy when dealing with the other Gong-gong, it is truly rare. Since you are not willing to accept my gift, it is hard for *Xiaoren* to feel at ease in my heart. How about this: I have raised two Fu Ling [China root] Hua Diao [Shaoxing yellow wine] pigs; they can be considered famous and incomparably priceless. I am going to slaughter them as soon as I get home. I will present one to Empress Dowager and His Majesty, and will deliver the other one to Gong-gong's room, so that Gong-gong can sample it."

"What Fu Ling Hua Diao pigs?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "The name sounds weird, I've never heard about if before."

Boss Qian said, "It is a secret handed down from generation to generation in my family. First we select a good breed pig, then after it is weaned from its mother's milk, we feed it with Fu Ling, Dang Shen [codonopsis root, poor man's ginseng], Qi Zi [willow seed] and other tonics. Other than feeding on various tonics, it invariably ate chicken eggs; as for the drink, it only drank Shaoxing yellow wine ..."

Before he even finished, the eunuchs roared in laughter; they said, "Where did you get such method of feeding pigs from? Won't it cost several hundred *taels* just to fatten one pig?"

Boss Qian said, "The cost is naturally not small, but the most difficult thing is the meticulous care and the time."

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "I must have a taste of this strange pig."

Boss Qian said, "I wonder what time this afternoon Gui Gong-

gong will be free? *Xiaoren* will deliver it promptly."

Wei Xiaobao thought that by the time he came down from the Upper Study Room, it would already be *wu* hour [11 am - 1 pm]; thereupon he said, "You may deliver it at the end of *wu* hour or beginning of *wei* hour [1 - 3 pm]!"

"Yes, yes," Boss Qian repeatedly replied. Again he bowed and wished for Wei Xiaobao's well-being before he went out.

"Gui Gong-gong," the eunuch supervisor approached Wei Xiaobao with a smile on his face, "When you see His Majesty later, you must not mention this matter."

"Why?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

The eunuch supervisor said, "His Majesty is young and curious, if he heard some bizarre thing like Fu Ling Hua Diao pigs, supposing he wanted to have it often, our responsibility as the servants would be too great. Besides, this kind of meat, which require untold hardship to feed and raise, will not come by too often, it won't be readily available any time. If His Majesty ate it and it suited his taste, he might issue an imperial decree for the kitchen to offer it daily, our share would only be to hang ourselves."

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and said, "You have a thorough thought."

The eunuch supervisor said, "This is the custom of the Catering Department handed down from generation to generation. In the dishes prepared for Empress Dowager and His Majesty, any seasonal fruits and vegetables must not be served."

Wei Xiaobao was puzzled, "Seasonal fruits and vegetables must not be served?" he asked, "Are you saying that you are serving only out of date or fruits and vegetables that have been kept overnight?" Although he had been the head of the Catering Department for several months, he had never paid

any attention to the imperial household's matter.

The eunuch supervisor laughed and said, "Serving only out of date or fruits and vegetables that have been kept overnight, that we never dare. However, there are fruits and vegetables which are available only for one or two months over the entire year; this, we must not serve. Supposing His Majesty ate it and liked it, he might ask for winter bamboo shoot in the summer, or fresh broad bean in the winter, everybody will have no choice but to hang ourselves."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Empress Dowager and His Majesty are completely enlightened sages, how can there be such thing?"

The eunuch supervisor was apprehensive; "Yes, yes," he busily said, "Empress Dowager and His Majesty are enlightened sages; of course there is no such thing. I heard that was the custom handed down from generation to generation in the previous Ming Palace. When it got to our Great Qing, His Majesty always communicate his feeling reasonably; it is much easier for us the servants to do his bidding." In his heart, he was secretly anxious; he regretted that he had said those few sentences earlier.

Chapter 10

Boastful talk enumerates shortcomings, each one as lofty as gentlemen's lavatory.

(Translated by Foxs)

The martial art masters displayed the most ingenious moves of their respective weapons, hacking diagonally, thrusting straight, cutting down, striking horizontally; their weapons were moving faster and faster. Ping Xi Wang Mansion's sixteen escorts stood motionless, with arms hanging down and palms kept close to their thighs, their eyes looked straight forward, as if they did

not see the martial art masters' attack.

After serving Kangxi, from the Upper Study Room Wei Xiaobao went down to the Catering Department. Not too long afterwards, Boss Qian, leading four helpers, arrived with two big fat pigs, already butchered and cleaned. Each one was more than three hundred catties. "Gui Gong-gong," he said to Wei Xiaobao, "You will get the most benefit from this Fu Ling Hua Diao pork if you take it as soon as you, Senior, wake up in the morning, it is best to have it cut and roasted immediately. *Xiaoren* will deliver one pig to your room; early in the morning tomorrow, you, Senior, may cut, roast and eat it immediately. What you can't finish, you can tell the kitchen to make salt-cured meat."

Wei Xiaobao knew there must be a profound meaning behind all these, he said, "You are very considerate; come with me then."

Boss Qian left one pig in the kitchen, and brought the other one to Wei Xiaobao's room. The Catering Department Head's dwelling was not far from the imperial kitchen. After the fat pig was delivered to his room, Wei Xiaobao ordered a little eunuch to take the helpers who carried the pig back to the kitchen and wait there. When the three people had left, he closed the door.

"Wei *Xiangzhu*," Boss Qian said in low voice, "Is there anybody else in this building?" Wei Xiaobao shook his head. Boss Qian stooped down and gently turned the clean pig over. The pig's belly was slit all the way to its throat, with the opening stitched together with several crisscrossed pig skin.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "There must be some strange thing hidden inside this fat pig's belly; perhaps some kind of weapon. Could it be that Tian Di Hui wants to kill people and create havoc in the Palace?" He could not stop his heart from thumping hard.

Boss Qian carefully cut the pig skin and with both hands pulled the pig's belly apart, then he wrapped his arms around a big chunk of object and gently took it out. "Ah!" Wei Xiaobao cried out in alarm; he saw the big chunk of object was a person. Boss Qian laid the person on the floor. The person was small and slim with long hair; it was a thirteen, fourteen years old girl, wearing light cotton undergarment. Her eyes were tightly closed and she did not move at all, only her chest was fluctuating slightly.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly surprised; he asked in low voice, "Who is this young miss? Why have you brought her here?"

Boss Qian replied, "This is the Mu Palace's Princess[108]."

Wei Xiaobao was even more amazed; with eyes opened wide he asked, "Mu Palace's Junzhu?"

"Exactly," Boss Qian said, "She is the younger sister of Mu Palace's young master. They kidnapped Xu *San Ge*, so we kidnapped this Junzhu Niang-niang as a hostage, so that they won't dare to harm a single strand of Xu *San Ge*'s hair."

Wei Xiaobao was pleasantly surprised. "Brilliant plan, brilliant plan!" he said, "How did you kidnap her?"

Boss Qian said, "Xu Tianchuan, Xu *San Ge* was kidnapped yesterday, for the second time Wei *Xiangzhu* led a group of brothers to the Willow Tree Lane to investigate. Subordinate went out on my own to inquire whether those Mu Palace people have other places where they stay temporarily other than the one on the Willow Tree Lane, perhaps Xu *San Ge* is being imprisoned in one of those places; I also wanted to know how many people they have in the Capital, so that if we really have to fight, we already have a background information in our hearts. Once the inquiry was made, hey, the number of Mu Palace people who come here is really a lot. The young master of Mu family takes the lead, followed by a large number of

martial art experts."

Wei Xiaobao frowned. "Damn it!" he said, "How many Green Wood Hall brothers do we have in the Capital? Can we fight them ten to one?"

"Wei *Xiangzhu* does not need to worry," Boss Qian said, "This time Mu Palace people came to Beijing not to fight our Tian Di Hui. It's actually because the eldest son of the big traitor Wu Sangui, Wu Yingxiong has arrived in the Capital."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "The Mu Palace wants to assassinate this little traitor surnamed Wu?" he asked.

"That's right," Boss Qian said, "Wei *Xiangzhu* has an incredible foresight. When the big traitor and little traitor are in Yunnan, they can't make any move. As soon as they leave Yunnan, then the opportunity arises. It's just that naturally this little traitor has a thorough protection, there are not a few martial art experts by his side, guarding him; to kill him is definitely not an easy matter. Those people from Mu Palace indeed have several other temporary residence, when subordinate went to check it out, those people were not home, there was not a trace of Xu *San Ge* either. There was only this little girl and two women looking after her left in the house. It was a golden opportunity which is hard to come by ..."

"Therefore, you led a goat in passing, you pulled a pig with hands behind your back, and take her away?" Wei Xiaobao continued.

Boss Qian smiled. "Exactly," he said, "Although this little Miss is young, the Mu Palace treats her as a phoenix; as long as this Xiao Junzhu is in our hands, Xu *San Ge* is as stable as Mount Tai, we don't have to worry that they won't take a good care of him."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Qian *Dage* has indeed rendered a great merit."

Boss Qian said, "Many thanks for Wei *Xiangzhu*'s compliment."

"Now that we have Xiao Junzhu, what do we do?" Wei Xiaobao asked, while stealing several glances toward the little girl lying on the floor. "This girl[109] looks quite beautiful," he mused.

Boss Qian said, "If we say this matter is big, it is not, but it is not small either; I must listen to Wei *Xiangzhu*'s advice on how to handle it."

Wei Xiaobao hesitantly asked, "What do you think we should do?" Although his interaction with Tian Di Hui people was only over a short time, he had had a good grasp of their disposition. These people politely called him *Xiangzhu*, always said with their mouths that they were waiting for *Xiangzhu*'s instruction and so on and so forth, in actuality, each one of them had already had an idea in their belly; they only wanted his approval, and thus they could push everything onto Wei *Xiangzhu*'s head, so that it would be unlikely that in the future they would assume significant responsibility. His way of countering this was to answer a question with a question, "What do you think we should do?"

Boss Qian said, "At present we only need to find a good hiding place for this Xiao Junzhu, so that the Mu Palace people won't be able to find her. This time the Mu family came to the Capital in really large number, although they are here to kill that little traitor Wu Yingxiong, we have killed their man, they have kidnapped Xu *San Ge*, right now they must be watching each one of our Tian Di Hui's residence and stop-over places closely. As soon as we stop to pee or let out a fart, I am afraid the Mu Palace people will know about it."

"Pfft," Wei Xiaobao stifled his laugh; thinking that this Boss Qian's style of speaking was enjoyable, totally fit his spleen and stomach. “Qian *Dage*,” he said with a laugh, “Let’s sit down and discuss it slowly.”

“Yes, yes, many thanks *Xiangzhu*,” Boss Qian said. He sat down on a chair and continued, “The reason subordinate hid Xiao Junzhu inside the pig’s belly and carried her into the Palace was, one, to avoid the Palace’s imperial bodyguards’ strict searching, two, to conceal it from Mu Palace people’s ears and eyes. His granny, I am afraid there are several really formidable characters among Mu *Gongye*'s subordinates, we cannot not guard against them. If Xiao Junzhu is not hidden in the Palace, it's difficult to protect against them snatching her back."

"So you say Xiao Junzhu ought to be hidden in the Palace?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Subordinate does not dare to say so," Boss Qian said, "Everything is for Wei *Xiangzhu* to decide. If she is hidden the Palace, without a doubt she will be in the world's most secure place. Even if Mu *Wangye* has more martial art experts, they still can't stand up against Imperial Palace bodyguards. Xiao Junzhu is unexpectedly in the Palace, not only they would never imagine it, they would never find her. Even if they knew, how could they have the ability to break into the Palace to rescue her? If they could enter the Palace to rescue Xiao Junzhu, then technically they could even abduct the Tatar Emperor. There is no such logic in the world. It's just that subordinate was too daring, I did not ask for Wei *Xiangzhu*'s instruction in advance, without permission I brought Xiao Junzhu into the Palace, placing Wei *Xiangzhu* in an even greater danger, adding greater inconvenience; indeed I deserve to die."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "You have brought her into the Palace, then you say you deserve to die, yet you are not dead yet. Hiding Xiao Junzhu in the Palace is indeed an excellent plan; first, Mu Palace people will never think about it, second, they can never get her out. You are daring, could it be that my courage is inferior?" Thereupon he said with a laugh, "Your plan is very good; I'll hide Xiao Junzhu in here."

"Yes, yes," Boss Qian said, "If Wei *Xiangzhu* says this is all right, then it is all right. Subordinate thinks that when this matter is over, we can always return Xiao Junzhu to them. When they find out Junzhu *Niang-niang* has been living in the Palace, it won't bring disgrace to her status. If she were kept in the basement of my slaughterhouse, and always smelled the stinky stench of cows' blood and pigs' blood, unavoidably it would be too unfair for her."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Just feed her Fu Ling, Dang Shen, Shaoxing yellow wine, and chicken eggs, and she will be all right."

"Heh, heh ..." Boss Qian laughed, he said, "Besides, although Xiao Junzhu is very young, she is a woman after all, if she stayed with us, stinky men, unavoidably her reputation would be tarnished. If she stays with Wei *Xiangzhu*, it won't matter."

Wei Xiaobao was baffled, "Why?" he asked.

"Wei *Xiangzhu* is also young," Boss Qian said, "Much less you are ... you are working in the Palace, naturally ... naturally it won't matter." He hummed and he hawed, as if it was somewhat inappropriate to talk.

Seeing his embarrassed expression, Wei Xiaobao had to ponder for a moment before he finally understood: "You are saying that because I am a court eunuch, with me guarding Xiao Junzhu, her reputation won't be tarnished. But you don't know that I am a fake eunuch." It was precisely because he was not a real eunuch that he had to think before he understood; otherwise, as soon as Boss Qian spoke the first sentence, he would have understood.

Boss Qian asked, "Is Wei *Xiangzhu*'s bedroom inside?" Wei Xiaobao nodded. Boss Qian bent over to pick Xiao Junzhu up and brought her in, and lay her down on the bed. Originally there was a big bed and a small bed in the bedroom. After Hai

Tianfu's death, Wei Xiaobao had the small bed removed. He had too much secret in him that he did not want any little eunuch staying with him to look after him.

Boss Qian said, "When subordinate carried Xiao Junzhu into the Palace, I sealed the *Shen Tang* and *Yang Gang* acupoints on her back, and also the *Tian Zhu* acupoint on the back of her neck, so that she wouldn't be able to move or say anything. When Wei *Xiangzhu* wants to feed her, you need to unseal her acupoints; however, it is best if you seal the *Huan Tiao*[110] acupoint on her leg first, so that she won't run away. Mu Palace people have very high level of martial art skill; most likely this little Miss does not know much martial art, but we can't not guard against her."

Wei Xiaobao wanted to ask him what *Shen Tang* and *Huan Tiao* were, or how to seal and unseal acupoints, but changed his mind because he thought that he was the Green Wood Hall's *Xiangzhu*, plus he was also *Zongduozhu*'s disciple, if even sealing and unsealing acupoints he did not know, wouldn't his underlings despise him even more? Besides, dealing with a young girl should not be difficult; thereupon he nodded and said, "I understand."

Bos Qian said, "May I borrow a knife from Wei *Xiangzhu*?"

Wei Xiaobao wondered in his heart, "What do you want a knife for?" But he pulled the dagger from his boot and handed it over to him.

Receiving the dagger, Boss Qian made a cut on the back of the pig. He did not expect the dagger to have unmatched sharpness, able to cut pork just like cutting tofu, as soon as the dagger cut, it went down all the way to the hilt. Boss Qian was startled; "Good blade!" he praised. He cut two pieces of meat from the back and two forelegs, he said, "Wei *Xiangzhu* may roast these and eat, tell the little gong-gong to bring the rest

back to the kitchen. Subordinate takes my leave now. If there is anything concerning our Society, subordinate can come anytime to report to Wei *Xiangzhu*."

"Good!" Wei Xiaobao said, while taking his dagger back. He cast a glance to the Xiao Junzhu lying on the bed and said, "This girl[111] sleeps so peacefully." He wanted to say, "If this little miss stayed in the Palace for a long time, it would be extremely dangerous. If somebody found out, it would be really bad." But he thought: how could a hero and warrior of Tian Di Hui afraid of danger? If those words ever come out of his mouth, unavoidably he would be despised by others.

As soon as Boss Qian left for the kitchen, Wei Xiaobao bolted the door and inspected the window to make sure there was no crack at all, before going to sit by the bedside. Looking at the Xiao Junzhu, he saw she had just opened her big round eyes and was looking at the top of the bed. Seeing Wei Xiaobao walked in, she hastily closed her eyes. Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "You can't move, you can't speak, you can only lying quietly in here, nothing's sweeter than that." Looking at her clothes, he noticed it was not soiled at all, he thought Boss Qian must have cleaned the pig's belly very well that not even the slightest blood stain left; thereupon he pulled the quilt over her body. He saw her cheeks were snow white, without any blood at all; her long eyelashes trembled continuously, apparently she was very scared. He laughed and said, "Don't be afraid, I won't kill you. In a few more days, I will let you out."

Xiao Junzhu opened her eyes and looked at him, but instantly closed her eyes again. Wei Xiaobao mused, "In Jianghu your Mu Palace has great power and prestige. That day along the way north of Jiangsu your family's Bai Hansong was very arrogant, he did not consider *laozi* in his eyes at all, but right now he is dead, killed by my subordinate. His granny …" Thinking to this point, he stretched out his hand and looked at his wrist, on

which the black purplish circle around it had not vanished, and he could still faintly feel the pain. He mused, “That Bai Hanfeng’s *Gege* is dead, since he could not vent his anger, he pinched *laozi*’s bone that it almost broke; who could have thought that Mu Palace’s Junzhu *Niang-niang* has fallen into my hands? If *Laozi* wants to hit I can just hit, if I want to curse I can just curse, you can’t move even for half a *fen*, ha ha!” In his complacency, he could not refrain from letting out an audible laugh.

Xiao Junzhu heard the laughter and opened her eyes to see why he was laughing. Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “You are a Junzhu *Niang-niang*, and you feel great, aren’t you? Your granny, in *laozi*’s eyes you are nothing!” Taking a step forward, he grabbed her right ear and pulled it three times, then he pinched her nose and twisted it twice, while laughing out loud.

Tears flowing out of Xiao Junzhu’s closed eyes, two streaks of pearl rolled down the sides of her face. “Don’t cry!” Wei Xiaobao shouted, “When *laozi* tells you not to cry, you must not cry!” But Xiao Junzhu’s tears flowed even more. “Hot piece mama, stinky ‘little mother’s skin’, you are so stubborn!” Wei Xiaobao cursed, “Open your eyes, look at me!”

Xiao Junzhu closed her eyes tighter, Wei Xiaobao said, “Ha, you still think you are in the Mu Palace, your mama! Your family’s Liu, Bai, Fang and Su, four great generals, what’s so damn special about them? There will come a day when they will fall into *laozi*’s hands, each and every one of them will be beheaded and chopped into mincemeat.” Raising his voice he shouted again, “Are you going to open your eyes or not?”

Xiao Junzhu strained to keep her eyes closed. Wei Xiaobao said, “Alright, you are unwilling to open your eyes, then what’s the purpose of your pair of eyeballs? I’d better dig them out and eat them to accompany *laozi*’s wine.” While saying that, he placed the flat edge on her eyelid and dragged it back and forth

several times.

Xiao Junzhu's entire body trembled in fright, but still she did not open her eyes. Wei Xiaobao was at a loss of what to do. He said, "You don't want to open your eyes, but I want you to open your eyes. We'll see between the two of us, is it you, Junzu *Niang-niang* more formidable, or is it me, a little ruffian, the little beggar more formidable. For the time being I am not going to dig your eyeballs; if I do, you will win, since you won't see me forever. I am going to carve some drawings on your cheeks with the tip of my dagger. Left side will be a little turtle, right side will be a pile of cow dung. After the cut become a scar in the future, when you go out on the street, thousands upon thousands people will surround you and look at you; they will say, 'Pretty, pretty, come and look at Mu Palace's young beauty, with a tortoise on her left cheek and a pile of cow dung on the right cheek.' Are you or are you not going to open your eyes?"

Xiao Junzhu could not move her body at all, the only decision she could make was to open her eyes or not. Hearing Wei Xiaobao's words, she closed her eyes even tighter. Wei Xiaobao thought aloud, "Turns out this stinky b1tch does not like her own face of being not beautiful, so she wants me to decorate her face. Alright, I will draw the turtle first!" He opened the ink slab on the table and rubbed the ink stick, then dipped the writing brush into the ink. The ink slab and brush used to belong to Hai Laogong. Wei Xiaobao had never touched a pen in all his life, right now he was holding the pen like holding chopsticks. He started to draw a small turtle on Xiao Junzhu's left cheek.

Xiao Junzhu's tears flowed down her cheek, leaving a streak mark on the drawing of the turtle.

Wei Xiaobao said, "I am drawing with a pen first, then I'll carve it with the dagger. It's just like people making stamp. Right, right, Junzhu *Niang-niang*, when we are done, I'll take

you to the main street of Chang'an's city gate, I'll call out, 'Which guest would like to have a turtle print? Three *wen* a sheet.' I'll apply black ink to your face, and when someone gives me money, I'll put a piece of white paper on your face, and there's the turtle, very quick! One day I can print a hundred sheets; that will be three hundred *wen* of copper, enough for me to splurge." While chattering, he peeked to see Xiao Junzhu's expression, and saw that her eyelashes were trembling incessantly; clearly she was angry, but also scared. Wei Xiaobao was very proud of himself. "Um," he said, "A pile of cow dung on the right cheek; but nobody would buy a print of cow dung. I'd rather carve a pig, a fat and stupid pig. Business is going to be good."

Raising the pen, he made a drawing on her right cheek. Whatever it was, it has four legs and a tail, it could be a cat or a dog. Putting the pen down, he took a pair of silver scissors and gently placed the scissors on Xiao Junzhu's left cheek. "You don't open your eyes, I am going to carve the picture!" he shouted, "I'll carve the turtle first, the fat pig can wait later."

Xiao Junzhu's tears gushed out, but clearly she did not want to open her eyes. Wei Xiaobao did not have any choice, since he did not want to admit defeat, he had to gently run the point of the scissors over her face to draw. The point of the scissors was actually very blunt, although Xiao Junzhu's skin was very delicate, there was no way the scissors would harm her. However, she was so frightened that all she knew was that this evil man was carving her face with a knife. She gasped for breath, and then passed out.

Seeing her different expression, Wei Xiaobao was afraid that he had scared her to death; he was shocked, and hastily held out his hand to feel her breathing. Fortunately she was still breathing, thereupon he said, "Stinky girl, you pretend to die!" He mused, "Even if you have to die you are not willing to open

your eyes; will I have to submit to you?” Fetching a wet cloth, he wiped the black ink off her face. He had to wipe it three times before her face was clean.

Seeing her thin eyebrows and long eyelashes, her small mouth and stuck out nose, her exquisite features and beautiful countenance, Wei Xiaobao thought aloud, “You are a Junzu *Niang-niang*, I am sure you are looking down on a little eunuch like me, but I am also looking down on you; won’t that make us even?”

After a while, Xiao Junzhu slowly regained her consciousness. As soon as she opened her eyes, she saw Wei Xiaobao’s eyes were less than a *chi* apart from her own eyes; he was staring maliciously at her. She could not help but was shocked and hastily closed her eyes again. Wei Xiaobao laughed heartily and said, “Finally you open your eyes to look at me. *Laozi* has won, hasn’t he?”

Knowing that he had won, his heart was very happy; however, Xiao Junzhu was unable to speak, so unavoidably he was rather disappointed. He was thinking of unsealing her acupoints, but he did not know how; he said, “Your acupoints were sealed, if they are not unsealed, you can’t eat, won’t you be starved to death then? Actually, I am thinking of unsealing your acupoints. I have learned the unsealing acupoints technique in the past, but now I already forget. Can you? If you can’t, just lie down perfectly still, don’t make any move. But if you can, blink your eyes three times.”

He fixed his gaze on Xiao Junzhu, but she did not move at all. Only after a long time suddenly her eyes slowly blinked three times. Wei Xiaobao was delighted; he said, “I only know that Mu Palace people are all surnamed Mu, so each and every one of you must be a blockhead [surname ‘Mu’ sounds like ‘wood’], with stupid head and stupid brain, don’t know anything. Turns out you, blockhead, still know how to unseal acupoints.”

He carried her off and sat her on a chair; he said, “Pay attention, I will point to various position on your body one by one; if I point to the correct position, blink your eyes three times, if it is incorrect, just open your eyes wide, do not move at all. When I've found the sealed acupoint, I will unseal it for you, do you understand? If you do, blink your eyes."

Xiao Junzhu blinked three times. Wei Xiaobao nodded. "Very good!" he said, "I'll start pointing." Wei Xiaobao held out a hand and pointed to the right side of her chest, "Is it here?" he asked.

Immediately Xiao Junzhu's face blushed deep red, but she kept her eyes wide open. How could she dare to blink even once? Wei Xiaobao pointed to the left side of her chest and asked, "Is it here?"

Xiao Junzhu's face was even redder; she had opened her eyes for a long time, and now she could not help but blinking one time. "Ah!" Wei Xiaobao exclaimed loudly, "It's here!"

Xiao Junzhu hastily opened her eyes wide; she was ashamed, anxious, and unspeakably distressed. These two people were both about thirteen, fourteen years old; about the matter between a man and a woman, they seemed to understand, but not quite understand. It's just that girls usually understand human affairs earlier than boys. Wei Xiaobao grew up in a brothel, he observed plenty of indecent interaction between brothel customers and the prostitutes on daily basis. Although did not understand the idea behind it, he always knew that those actions were not appropriate.

Seeing her in such a distressing situation, Wei Xiaobao was very proud of himself. He felt that at this moment, the disgrace he experienced at the Willow Tree Lane the previous day had been vented, it had been avenged. He pointed to the east and to the west, all over Xiao Junzhu's body. Xiao Junzhu struggled with everything she had to keep her eyes open wide, she did

not dare to blink ever so slightly, for fear that if she was not careful and blinked unintentionally, the important matter would be spoiled. Not too long afterwards, tiny beads of perspiration were beginning to form on the tip of her nose. Luckily right that moment Wei Xiaobao happened to point to her left underarm, the correct location of the acupoint needed to be unsealed; hastily she blinked three times. Her heart was relieved, she heaved a deep sigh.

"Ha ha," Wei Xiaobao laughed, "It's here alright. It's not that *laozi* did not know, it's just that my memory is not good, momentarily I did not remember." He thought, "After her acupoint has been unsealed, I don't know how good her martial art skill is, if this little girl started beating people, it would be troublesome." Turning around, he fetched two waistbands and tied her feet together firmly first, and then he tied her hands to the back of the chair.

Xiao Junzhu did not know how he was going to add to her torment, involuntarily her face showed a panic-stricken expression. "You are scared of me, aren't you?" Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "Since you are scared, *laozi* will unseal your acupoint." Reaching out toward her left armpit, he gently scratched several times.

Xiao Junzhu felt the itch was very difficult to bear, but she was unable to move, so her face buldged very red.

Wei Xiaobao said, "I used to be an expert in sealing and unsealing acupoints technique, it's just that *laozi* is extremely busy lately; I don't have time to think about trivial things like this, so I kind of forget. Is this how you unseal acupoint?" While saying that, he massaged her armpit several times.

Xiao Junzhu felt another burst of unbearable itch, her face showed a slight anger.

Wei Xiaobao said, "This is my most profound unsealing

acupoint technique. The more profound technique is only effective if used on a superior quality person. You, this little girl, are not a superior quality person, if first-class technique is being used on your body, indeed it won't have any effect. Alright, I will try using the second-class technique." Stretching out his finger, he poked her armpit several times.

Xiao Junzhu felt itchy and hurt, tears streaming down from her eyes.

"Uh, second-class technique won't do the job either," Wei Xiaobao said, "Could it be that you are a third-class girl? I have no choice, I will have to try the third-class technique." Raising his palm, he slapped her armpit once, still nothing happened.

Sealing acupoint is an advanced skill in the study of martial art. The martial art practitioner must have an extremely strong foundation, must receive clear direction of a master, and must train assiduously for several years before he can master the technique. Sealing and unsealing acupoints are the two sides of a coin, if one knows to seal acupoints, one will also know how to unseal acupoints. One must be able to accurately locate the acupoint, and the finger must have the right combination of hard and soft inner force before one could either seal or unseal another person's acupoint. Wei Xiaobao did not have any internal energy, and he had never learned how to seal acupoints; with just random guess and trial-and-error, how could he be able to unseal Xiao Junzhu's acupoint?

Slapping failed, he changed into grabbing. Grabbing did not work, he changed into twisting. Xiao Junzhu was both angry and anxious; she could not stop tears from flowing down her face. By this time Wei Xiaobao no longer had the intention to torment her; he had been busy for half a day, yet failed to unseal her acupoint. His own forehead was wet with perspiration, out of shame, unavoidably he became somewhat angry. "I have even used the eighth-class technique, but it feels

like a mouse trying to pull a tortoise; it is completely useless. Could it be that you are a ninth-class girl? *Laozi* is a man of dignity, a man with a long history, I had determined not to use the ninth-class martial art. However, it seems to me that your Mu Palace people are all damn rotten blockheads, with wooden heads and wooden brains, simple intelligence and simple[112] feeling. Let me tell you this: in spite of my own dignity right now, I am going to try the ninth-class martial art against your ninth-class 'little mother's skin' body."

Immediately he bent his middle finger and used his thumb to hold it, and then putting forth his strength he flicked it away toward Xiao Junzhu's armpit, while saying, "This is 'flicking cotton'." And then he sang a nursery rhyme, "Clap, clap, clap, flick the cotton. The cotton stinks, fry the black soybean. The black soybean is burnt, mix it with pepper. The pepper's hot, raise a pagoda. The top of the pagoda is pointy, penetrating the sky. The sky drops the rain, creates a landslide, let your Mu family's wooden head wooden brain, dog head and dog brain, your great ancestors of eighteen generation, slip!"

As he sang a line, a flicked once; successively flicking for a dozen times. When he sang the last word, Xiao Junzhu suddenly let out an 'Oh!', and broke into a cry. Wei Xiaobao was ecstatic, he sprang up and leaped up and down, while laughing and saying, "I told you, Mu Palace's little girl is indeed a ninth-class little thing, must be dealt with using the ninth-class martial art."

Crying, Xiao Junzhu said, "You … you are the … the … the … the ninth-class …" her voice was melodious, tender and lovely, with a soft Yunnan accent; it was unspeakably pleasant to the ear.

Using a falsetto, Wei Xiaobao imitated her, "You … you are the … the … the … the ninth-class …" and then he burst out

laughing.

What happened was when he randomly flicked, he repeatedly hit the *Ye Yuan*[113] Acupoint on Xiao Junzhu's armpit. The *Ye Yuan* acupoint belongs to the Foot Shaoyang Channel of the Gall Bladder, it is located three *cun* below the armpit. Various acupoints on human head, such as *Si Kong Zhu*, *Yang Bai*, *Lin Qi*[114], and the others belong to this channel. He had grabbed, twisted, hit and flicked this Ye Yuan acupoint. Although his hand strength was insufficient, but after a long time, the various acupoints on Xiao Junzhu's head were activated, so then her speech was not obstructed.

Seeing he was unexpectedly able to unseal Xiao Junzhu's acupoint, Wei Xiaobao was extremely happy; almost instantly his animosity against the Mu Palace was largely gone. He said, "My tummy is hungry, I assume you are not full either, I'd better give you something to eat first." He was a glutton to begin with, now that he became the head of the Catering Department, all his subordinates in supervisory positions were currying his favor by instructing the kitchen to deliver all kinds of fresh delicacies to him daily. He wandered around on the streets day in and day out, he would buy whatever pastry or candy he saw in the marketplace; therefore, there were countless bottles, jars, small boxes, and small bamboo deep baskets in his rooms, all filled with bits and pieces of delicacies. A teenager with several hundred thousand *taels* in his hands, a glutton and a spender by nature, how could he resist from buying all these snacks?

He took out the delicacies and said, "This is rose mung bean cake, try it." Xiao Junzhu shook her head. Wei Xiaobao picked another box and opened the lid, he said, "This is Beijing's famous delicacy, the yellow pea. I am sure you don't have it in Yunnan. Try one piece!" Xiao Junzhu shook her head again. Wei

Xiaobao wanted to show off his belongings, so he piled all sorts of cakes, pastries and candies on the table. “Look,” he said, “Don’t you think I have a lot of goodies? Even though you are a Junzhu of a palace, most likely you have never had these many delicacies. If you don’t like to eat sweets, try our kitchen’s crispy thin fried onion, it’s a rarity in the world. Even His Majesty loves it. Try one, I guarantee you’ll like it.” Xiao Junzhu still shook her head. In succession Wei Xiaobao presented seven, eight of his best collections, Xiao Junzhu always shook her head.

Wei Xiaobao’s anger shot to the roof. “Stinky girl, your mouth is so picky, you don’t want this, you don’t want that, what is it that you want?” he asked.

Xiao Junzhu said, “I … I don’t want to eat anything …” but she only said those words and broke into a sob.

Hearing her cry, Wei Xiaobao’s heart softened somewhat. “If you don’t want to eat anything,” he said, “Are you going to starve yourself to death?”

“I … I’d rather die of starvation,” Xiao Junzhu replied.

“I can’t believe you really want to starve yourself to death,” Wei Xiaobao said.

At this moment, someone lightly knocked the door. Wei Xiaobao knew it must be the little eunuch delivering his meal. Afraid that Xiao Junzhu might make noise and alert other people, Wei Xiaobao fetched a piece of towel and tied it around Xiao Junzhu’s mouth before opening the door. He told the little eunuch, “Today I’d like to have Yunnan dish; tell the kitchen to make some immediately and have it sent here.” The little eunuch complied and left.

Wei Xiaobao brought the meal into his room. He took off the towel on Xiao Junzhu’s mouth and sat down across from her. He laughed and said, “If you don’t want to eat, then I’ll eat.

Mmmm, this is fried beef in thick soya sauce, this is fish fillet pickled in wine, this is sliced beef in garlic paste, and then there's Zhenjiang salted meat, plain pan-fried shrimp, and a bowl of chicken feet and koumo mushroom soup; all are incomparably tasty. Delicious! Delicious!" He scooped a spoonful of soup, intentionally slurped and smacking his lips noisily. But when he stole a glance at the Xiao Junzhu, he saw tears streaming down her face; she did not show the slightest desire to eat at all.

Wei Xiaobao's enthusiasm was doused; he said resentfully, "Turns out a ninth-class little girl only loves to eat ninth-class stinky fish, stinky meat, stinky duck egg; here I have first-class dishes and delicacies, which are for first-class people only. Just wait and I'll have stinky fish, stinky meat, stinky duck egg and stinky tofu delivered here for you to eat."

Xiao Junzhu said, "I don't eat stinky duck egg and stinky tofu."

Wei Xiaobao nodded and said, "Um, turns out you only eat stinky fish and stinky meat."

"You love talking nonsense," Xiao Junzhu said, "I don't eat stinky fish and stinky meat."

Wei Xiaobao ate several chopsticks of shrimp and a piece of salted meat. "The flavor is really good," he praised. Seeing all along the Xiao Junzhu was unmoved, he lay down the chopsticks, while pondering in his heart how to make her beg for food.

Quite a while later, the little eunuch came back delivering the ordered meal. "Gui Gong-gong," he said, "The chef told *Xiao Ren* to report to Gong-gong: this Guo Qiao rice noodle [vermicelli] soup is extremely hot. It doesn't seem to emit any steam, but it is very hot. This Xuanwei Huo Jiao[115] was cooked in preserved sweet lotus seed; it was cooked in a hurry,

perhaps it is not very tender, the chef asked Gong-gong to excuse him. This one is Yunnan's black big-head vegetable [rutabaga]. This dish is Erhai Lake of Dali's Gong Yu Gan[116], although it wasn't fresh, it is still very rare; it was fried in Yunnan's red flower oil. In this pot is Pu'er tea of Yunnan. The chef said that the famous steamed chicken of Yunnan takes more than four hours to be cooked well, it will be evening before we can deliver it to Senior, Gui Gong-gong."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. After the little eunuch left, he brought all the dishes into his room.

The imperial kitchen had managed to prepare four types of authentic Yunnan cuisine in such a short moment, their skill could be considered first-rate. Actually, with Wu Sangui being the Ping Xi Wang in Yunnan, although he was domineering, still, on Chinese New Year and other festivities, he would pay tribute to the imperial household, and give holiday gifts to various princes and dukes; his generosity was matchless, ten times more lavish than his peers, as a result, the number of people who speak on his behalf in the imperial court was indeed not just a few. When Wu Sangui sent his tribute to the Emperor, other than gold, silver and jewels, ivory, rhinoceros horn and other precious articles, he also sent all kinds of Yunnan local products, everything that was expected to be found in Yunnan. Because of this, it was not difficult at all for the imperial kitchen to prepare tasty Yunnan dishes in such a short time.

Actually, Xiao Junzhu was hungry, seeing these tasty dishes from her hometown, she could not stop her heart from being moved; however, Wei Xiaobao had indeed bullied her really bad, so she was unwilling to yield. She was determined: "No matter how this little vile creature entices me, I am not going to eat."

Wei Xiaobao picked a piece of bright red and fragrant Xuanwei ham with his chopsticks and held it close to Xiao Junzhu's

mouth; he laughed and said, “Open your mouth!” Xiao Junzhu gnashed her teeth and shut her mouth tight. Wei Xiaobao rubbed the ham back and forth on her lips, so that her lips were covered in grease; he said with a laugh, “Be a good girl and eat this ham, then I will unseal your acupoint.” Xiao Junzhu shook her head with mouth closed tight.

Wei Xiaobao put down the ham, he opened the lid of the hot soup, and maliciously said, “This soup is extremely hot. If you are willing to eat, I am going to wait until it cools down a little, I’ll feed you slowly, a spoon by a spoon. If you don’t want to eat? Humph, humph!” Reaching out with his left hand, he pinched her nose.

Her breathing obstructed, Xiao Junzhu had no choice but to open her mouth. Wei Xiaobao picked a porcelain spoon with his right hand and stuffed it into her mouth, saying, “I will force the hot soup in like this, so it will scald your intestines!” Only after letting Xiao Junzhu gasping for breath for a moment did he take out the porcelain spoon from her mouth with his left hand.

Xiao Junzhu knew that Guo Qiao vermicelli soup was actually half oil, it was several times hotter than ordinary soup; if he really forced the soup into her throat, she might really die of scalding. She cried and said, “You carved my face, I … I don’t want to live anymore, so grotesque …”

Wei Xiaobao mused, “Turns out you really believe I carved a turtle on your face.” He smiled and said, “Although you face has an engraving on it, this little turtle is very beautiful, when you go out on the street, I guarantee everybody will cheer and applaud!”

“It’s dead ugly,” Xiao Junzhu said, “I … I’d rather die.”

“Ay, such a pretty little turtle,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You really don’t want it? If I knew, I would not have to put that much thought into carving it on your face.”

“What carving?” Xiao Junzhu said, “I … I am not a blockhead either.”

“But your surname is clearly Mu,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “What do you mean you are not a blockhead?”

“My family’s surname, the character Mu [沐],” Xiao Junzhu said, “is the Mu [木, wood] with three ‘water’ [氵] radical, not the ‘wood’ from the ‘wooden head’ [木头, blockhead].”

Wei Xiaobao could not tell those two ‘Mu’ characters apart, he said, “If you put a blockhead in the water, it’s no more than a piece of rotten blockhead.” Xiao Junzhu cried again.

“Why do you have to cry all the time?” Wei Xiaobao said, “If you call me ‘good *Gege*’ three times, I will fix your face, I will scrape the little turtle off so that not the least bit of trace will remain.”

Xiao Junzhu blushed. “How can you scrape it off?” she asked, “If you scrape my face again, how will it look?”

“I have an effective cure, miracle medicine,” Wei Xiaobao said, “On a first-class hero and warrior, of course it is rather difficult to fix. But you are a ninth-class little girl, fixing your face is really easy.”

“I don’t believe you,” Xiao Junzhu said, “You just love to deride others.”

“Are you going to call or not?” Wei Xiaobao said. With a blushing face, Xiao Junzhu shook her head.

Looking at her loveable and bashful appearance, Wei Xiaobao was unable to stop his heart from being moved. “The little turtle was carved not too long ago,” he said, “It is really easy to fix. If you wait longer, it is going to be more difficult. If the tail of the turtle remained and can’t be fixed, I am afraid you will regret it later.”

Although Xiao Junzhu was half believing and half doubting his

words, she was anxious to try it; supposing he was right, that in the future a turtle tail remained on her face, it would be extremely unsightly. Her face grew even redder as she whispered, “You … you are not deceiving me?”

“Why would I deceive you?” Wei Xiaobao said, “The sooner you call, the sooner I will start, the better the fix on your face will be. Quickly call me!”

Xiao Junzhu said, “What if … what if after I call you, your fix failed?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Then I will reimburse you double, I will call you ‘good *Meimei*’ six times!”

Xiao Junzhu’s entire face turned deep red. “You are very bad, I won’t call!” she said.

“Alright,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Since you don’t trust me, we’ll make a deal. You call me ‘good *Gege*’ one time first, then after I fix your face, you call me the second time. I’ll have a mirror so that you can see it for yourself, if really not a scar is left, you are fully satisfied, you call me the third time. Who knows? Perhaps you will be very happy that you’ll call me ten times in a row.”

“No, no,” Xiao Junzhu hastily said, “You said three times, how can you add to that number?”

Wei Xiaobao smiled. “Alright, three times it is,” he said, “Just call me quickly!” Xiao Junzhu moved her lips several times, but each time she could not call.

“What’s so hard about calling me ‘good *Gege*’?” Wei Xiaobao said, “I did not ask you to call me ‘good husband’, or ‘dear husband’. If you don’t call quickly, my price will go up.”

Xiao Junzhu was afraid he might really force her to call him ‘husband’; stuttering, she said, “I will say the first word, after you really fix my face, I will continue with the next … the next

two words.”

Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, “Ay, you really know how to haggle over the price. Giving the money first or giving the money later is just the same. Alright, you call!”

Xiao Junzhu closed her eyes and softly called, “Good …” This word ‘good’ was so soft that it sounded like a buzzing mosquito, if Wei Xiaobao’s hearing was somewhat lacking, he would not be able to hear it at all. On top of that, her face was blushing very deep red.

Wei Xiaobao muttered to himself, “Calling me like this is very disappointing. Seven losses and eight discounts later, what’s left for me? Besides, I don’t know what words follow the word ‘good’ in your heart; it could be ‘good son of a b1tch’, or it could be ‘good little thief’.”

“No,” Xiao Junzhu hurriedly said, “In my heart, I was thinking of … of those two characters. I am not lying to you, I really am not lying to you.”

“Which two characters?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Is it ‘turtle’ [wugui], or ‘little thief’ [xiao zei]?”

“No, no!” Xiao Junzhu said, “It’s ‘Ge’ …” As soon as the word ‘Ge’ came out, she hastily closed her mouth.

Wei Xiaobao laughed, “Very good,” he said, “Let’s just say you still have conscience. In that case, I’ll use the best method to fix your face. When you ask a mason to fix a hole in the wall to let the dog comes in and out, with the first-class price, the mason will use a first-class technique; if the price is too low, the mason will cram several rotten bricks and be done with it, he won’t even whitewash it with lime. Don’t you think it will be extremely unsightly?”

Xiao Junzhu said, “I have already called, you still make fun of me by calling me a dog hole and rotten bricks.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and said, "I was giving you an analogy." Opening Hai Laogong's trunk, he took the medicine chest out and placed the dozens of medicine bottles from the chest on the table. He poured out some medicinal powder from each bottle, while acting as if he was deep in thought he mixed everything. Originally Xiao Junzhu was only 30% convinced, but seeing these many medicine bottle, her confidence rose up by 20% more. Wei Xiaobao put the medicine powder mix into a medicinal earthenware mortar, which he then brought outside the room. Once he was outside, however, he poured everything onto a paper wrap, which he hid inside his pocket. He took a piece of mung bean cake, a piece of pea-flour cake, and added a piece of lotus seed, which he dug out of a Guangdong moon cake. After washing the mortar clean, until there was not the least bit of medicinal powder left, he put the lotus seed, mung bean cake and pea-flour cake into the mortar, and then he pounded the cakes into a mush. He added two soup-spoons of honey, and having a sudden inspiration, he spat two mouthful of saliva into the mixture, and mixed everything evenly.

Reentering the room, he said, "This is 'Sheng Ji Ling Gao' [Efficacious Ointment to Grow the Flesh/Muscle], effective against countless maladies." After thinking for a moment he added, "Your face has been carved by me; if I can restore it to its original state, it would only look the same as before, you would not see my true ability." Taking the cap inlaid with jewels he wore the previous day, he pulled four pearls away from the cap and held them on his left palm. "What do you think of these pearls?" he asked Xiao Junzhu.

For generations Xiao Junzhu’s family had held the title of 'King' conferred by the previous Emperor; although by the time she was born the Mu family had been in decline, she was after all, a noble woman of an aristocratic family, her knowledge was vastly different from that of a commoner. Seeing the pearls were of the size of a finger, gleaming with soft pearly luster as they slid

smoothly on his palm, she knew they were flawless, perfectly round pearls. "Those are very good pearls," she praised, "Four pearls, exactly the same size, like that are hard to come by!"

Wei Xiaobao was very proud of himself; he said, "I bought these pearls for two thousand nine hundred *taels* yesterday. They are very expensive, don't you agree?" Although these four pearls were expensive, they were not worth two thousand nine hundred *taels*; actually, they were only nine hundred *taels*, he added two thousand *taels* to deceive her. Taking another mortar, he put the pearls into the mortar and shook the mortar several revolutions, the pearls and the mortar struck against each other, creating clear ringing sound. Wei Xiaobao picked up a stone pestle and pound the pearls.

"Ah!" Xiao Junzhu exclaimed. "What are you doing?" she asked.

Seeing her serious expression and the astonishment on her little face, Wei Xiaobao was even more spirited. The reason he was showing off his extravagance was exactly to incite such astonishment. Immediately he pounded vigorously, crushing the four pearls, and then repeatedly gyrated the stone pestle until the pearls became powder. He said, "If I only restore your face to its original condition, I won't show Wei ... won't show Xiao Guizi Gong-gong's real ability; I must make your face ten times more beautiful than it was, and then you will delighted, without the least bit of reluctance, to call me ‘Good *Gege*’ ten times."

"Three times!" Xiao Junzhu said, "How can it change to ten?"

Wei Xiaobao only smiled, he poured the pearl powder into the paste consisting of mung bean cake, pea-flour cake, lotus seed, honey and saliva, mixed everything evenly with the pestle. Xiao Junzhu watched with eyes wide open, wondering what he was doing. Seeing he grind the four pearls into the mixture, she can well imagine that this ointment was very costly.

"Although four pearls are expensive," Wei Xiaobao said, "it is nothing compared to other priceless treasured medicinal powder. Your face was actually not bad, but we can't say it was first-rate in the world. After I apply the ointment, most likely it will turn into matchless in the world, 'bashful moon obstructing the flower' ..."

"Bashful flower obstructing the moon [i.e. beautiful woman]," Xiao Junzhu said. Hearing Wei Xiaobao speak incorrectly, without thinking she blurted out to correct him. But as soon as the words came out of her mouth, she could not help but feeling embarrassed.

To Wei Xiaobao however, using the wrong idiom was just like daily meal; he did not give it the slightest thought. "Right," he said, "You will turn into a little beauty 'bashful flower obstructing the moon', now that will be good." While speaking, he worked on smearing the bean putty mashed lotus seed and pearl paste on her face. Xiao Junzhu did not say anything, she let him randomly daubed her face with the ointment. In just a short moment, her entire face, save her eyes, ears, nose and mouth, was completely covered. She only thought that the sweet and fragrant smell of this medicinal ointment was really strong, not sharp like the smell of medicine at all, she did not feel any discomfort.

Seeing she was duped, Wei Xiaobao desperately tried not to laugh; he said in his heart, "Just consider me being polite for not peeing in this medicinal ointment; I was looking at the great merit of your ancestor, Mu Ying, Mu *Wangye*. He was an outstanding founding minister, Wei Xiaobao yields to him 30%."

Finished applying the ointment, Wei Xiaobao washed his hands clean and said, "After the ointment is dry, I am going to use the amazing medicinal powder to wash your face clean. Three application, three washes, it's impossible for you not to be bashful moon ... bashful flower obstructing the moon."

Xiao Junzhu thought, "What 'impossible not to be bashful flower obstructing the moon'? This sentence sounds quite awkward." She asked, "Why must you apply three times?"

"Three times can be considered nothing," Wei Xiaobao replied, "When people make soy sauce, it has to be steamed and dried out in the sun nine times. Even when cooking dog meat, it has to be boiled three times in a row."

"You are cursing me again as soy sauce and dog meat," Xiao Junzhu grumbled.

"I did not say soy sauce and dog meat," Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Dog meat cooked in soy sauce is simmer-fried dog meat. If no soy sauce is being used, then it is plain dog meat stew." With chopsticks he picked a piece of ham and brought it to her mouth. "Eat, please!" he said.

First, Xiao Junzhu was really hungry, second, she did not dare to offend Wei Xiaobao; she was afraid of his unpredictable actions, who knows? Perhaps he would leave a turtle tail on her face. Third, she saw how he grind the costly pearls without any reservation, unavoidably she had received his favor. After slight hesitation, she opened her mouth and ate.

Wei Xiaobao was ecstatic. "Good *Meizi*," he praised, "Now this is what I call good girl."

"I am ... I am not your good *meizi*," Xiao Junzhu said.

"Good *Jiejie*, then," Wei Xiaobao said. [Meizi and Jiejie - younger and older sister, respectively; used in a more intimate setting.]

"I am not," Xiao Junzhu said.

"Well, how about good *Mama*?" Wei Xiaobao said.

Xiao Junzhu giggled. "How ... how can I be ..." she stuttered.

Since the first time Wei Xiaobao saw her, this was the very

first time he heard her laughter. It's a pity her face was covered in lotus seed and bean paste, so it was difficult for him to see the flower-like dimples when she laughed. However, hearing her silver-bell-like laughter was enough to make his heart feel at ease and his spirit delighted. When Wei Xiaobao said, 'My good *Mama*,' he was actually cursing her as 'little wh0re', because his own mother was a prostitute. But hearing her joyous laugher was so unrestrained and tender, he could not help but feeling a bit regretful. He thought, "Nothing wrong with being a wh0re, in the Lovely Spring Courtyard my *Mama* is earning money, she is not necessarily inferior to damn wooden head wooden brain Junzhu from the Mu Palace." He picked several more pieces of ham to feed her; he said, "If you promise not to run away, I am going to unseal the acupoints on your hand."

"Why would I want to run away?" Xiao Junzhu said, "With a little turtle carved on my face, if I run away, I would look so ugly that I would die of shame."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "As soon as you find out there is no little turtle on your face, you will definitely run away. That Boss Qian did not say when he is going to let her out either. If the others find out I am hiding a little girl in the Palace, my responsibility will not be small; what should I do?"

While he was still deep in thought, suddenly from outside the door someone was calling out, "Gui Gong-gong, *Xiaoren* is an attendant in Prince Kang's mansion, I have something I'd like to see you about."

"Alright!" Wei Xiaobao replied; lowering his voice he said, "Somebody's coming, don't make any noise. Do you know what place this is?" Xiao Junzhu shook her head. Wei Xiaobao said, "If I tell you, you will jump of fright. All those people want to harm you. Only because I took pity on you that I have given you a temporary shelter. If they knew you are in her, humph, humph ..." While in his heart he was thinking hard, "What

should I say to frighten her the most? What would scare her the most?" An idea struck him; he said, "Those wicked people will strip you naked, then they'll spank your butts; it will be exceedingly painful." Xiao Junzhu's face turned red, but her eyes indeed showed fear.

Seeing the effect of his threat, Wei Xiaobao went out to open the door. Outside the door was a thirty-something court eunuch. The man paid his respect to Wei Xiaobao, and then respectfully said, "*Xiaoren* is from Prince Kang's mansion. Our *Wangye* said that he has not seen Gong-gong for a long time, and is very concerned. Today he has ordered a theatrical troupe and invites Gong-gong to come to the Prince's mansion to drink wine and watch the opera."

Hearing the word 'opera', Wei Xiaobao's spirit was aroused, but a Xiao Junzhu was hiding in his room, he was afraid someone might find out by accident, or perhaps she would make noise and attract other people's attention, then it would be very inconvenient for him; hence he was rather hesitant.

The eunuch said, "*Wangye* said that Gong-gong's presence is very much expected. The Palace is bustling with excitements today. There will be dice, pai gow, and all kinds of gambling."

When he heard the word 'opera', Wei Xiaobao's spirit was only aroused, but when he heard 'gambling', his spirit was greatly aroused. After acquiring the riches, he found that gambling with the Wen brothers, Ping Wei and the others was no longer interesting. He threw dice with them only to kill time. Since Prince Kang setup a casino in his mansion, he would be able to gamble with common people and warriors; how could he pay anymore attention to little princess or big princess? Thereupon he happily said, "Very well, wait here for a moment, I'll come with you."

He went back to his room, loosened the belt strapping Xiao Junzhu, lay her down on the bed, and then bound her hands

and feet again. He pulled the quilt over her body, and said in a low voice, “I have to do something outside, I’ll be back in a little bit.” Seeing the doubt on her eyes, he said, “I don’t have enough pearls, I need to buy some more to be ground and applied to your face, only then your face will be perfect.”

“You ... please don’t go,” Xiao Junzhu said, “Pearls are expensive.”

“Never mind that,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Your good *Gege* has plenty of money, I must make you bashful flower obstructing the moon; spending several thousand *taels* is nothing.”

“I … I am scared in here,” Xiao Junzhu said.

Seeing her pitiful but cute expression, Wei Xiaobao almost could not bear leaving her, but to ask him not to gamble, it was useless even if Xiao Junzhu was ten times more pitiful. He picked a piece of Gong fish and fed her, then he picked four pieces of eight-treasure cake and folded the cake over her mouth, saying, “When you open your mouth, a piece of cake will enter your mouth. But be careful, if the cake falls onto the pillow, you can’t eat it anymore.”

“You … please don’t go,” Xiao Junzhu said; but since there were cakes on top of her lips, her voice was barely audible. Wei Xiaobao pretended not to hear, he took a bundle of banknotes from his chest and stuffed it into his pocket. He opened the door, walked out, locked the door from the outside, and then hurriedly followed the eunuch to Prince Kang’s mansion.

When he arrived at the gate of the Prince Kang’s mansion, he saw on either side of the main gate stood two rows of imperial bodyguards, all wearing bright brocade uniform, with either a sword or a saber hanging from their waists. They looked so elegant and imposing; the mansion was a lot more heavily-guarded compared to Wei Xiaobao’s first visit. Obviously because of ‘Oboi’s followers’ had broken into the Palace, the

security was elevated.

Wei Xiaobao had just stepped in the main gate, Prince Kang had already rushed out to greet him, half squatting, he embraced Wei Xiaobao's waist. "Gui *Xiongdi*," he said with a laugh, "I haven't seen you for many days, you are growing taller and taller, and look more handsome than ever."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "*Wangye*, how are you?" [lit. 'are you good?' read on, you'll see ...]

Prince Kang laughed and said, "What's so good? You did not come to play at my house too often. It would be good if I get to see you more, it is not good if I rarely see you."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "*Wangye* has ordered me to come, that's exactly what I've been looking for."

"I will hold you accountable of what you've just said," Prince Kang said, "I am thinking of asking His Majesty to grant you some vacation, so that we can drink wine and watch the opera, to do as we please for ten days, eight days. I am just afraid His Majesty cannot do without you for even a day." He took Wei Xiaobao's hand, and the two of them walked in side by side. All the imperial bodyguards bowed to salute.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted. Although people were flattering him in the Palace, he was only an eunuch after all, where could he find such an opportunity to walk hand in hand with a prince like this?

When they reached the middle gate, two Manchurian high-ranking officials came out to greet them. One was the newly-appointed Commander of the Inner Imperial Bodyguards, Dolong, usually it was known as the *Shiwei Zongguan* [Imperial Bodyguard chief manager]. The other was Wei Xiaobao's sworn brother, Songgotu. Songgotu sprang forward and embraced Wei Xiaobao; he laughed heartily and said, "I heard *Wangye* was inviting you, so I invited myself too, so the two of us brothers

can enjoy the excitement together." The *Shiwei Zongguan* Dolong also came forward to fawn on him.

As soon as the four of them set their feet on the veranda in front of the main hall, the musicians played a happy tune. Wei Xiaobao had never received such a grand reception like this, he was radiant with delight, and almost could not stop himself from dancing with joy right then and there. When they reached the second hall, more than twenty officers had already standing in the atrium to welcome them. All these people were high-ranking officials: government ministers, vice ministers, generals, commanders of imperial family's personal guards, and so on. Songgotu introduced them one by one to Wei Xiaobao.

A court eunuch entered in a hurry, after doing his obeisance, he reported, "*Wangye*, Ping Xi Wang's Heir Apparent[117] has arrived."

Prince Kang laughed and said, "Very good! Gui *Xiongdi*, just sit back and relax, I am going out to welcome the guest." Then he turned around and left.

"Ping Xi Wang's Heir Apparent?" Wei Xiaobao mused, "Could it be Wu Sangui's son? What is he doing here?"

Songgotu leaned over, he laughed softly next to Wei Xiaobao's ear and said, "Good *Xiongdi*, congratulations, today you are going to get rich."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "It depends on my gambling luck."

Songgotu said with a laugh, "I am sure your gambling luck is good. Other than getting rich on the gambling table, there is another sure way of getting lucky."

"What's that?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Songgotu whispered on his ear, "Wu Sangui sends his son to pay tribute, all high-ranking official of the imperial court will not

be neglected."

"Oh," Wei Xiaobao said, "Wu Sangui sends his son to pay tribute. But I am not a high-ranking official of the imperial court."

"You are a high-ranking official in the Palace," Songgotu said, "Your prestige is a lot higher than a high-ranking official of the imperial court. Wu Sangui's son, Wu Yingxiong is very astute and competent, he is very sensible." Lowering his voice, he said, "Regardless of what Wu Yingxiong presents to you later, you must not show that you like it, just say lightly, 'The heir came to Beijing, you must have a tiring journey.' If he sees that you like the present, nothing will follow it. If you look indifferent, he will think that you do not like the gift, you consider it too little; then tomorrow he will return with big gift to make up for it."

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud; he said in low voice, "So that's how you knock the bamboo pole[118]."

Songgotu said in low voice, "It's foolish not to knock Yunnan's bamboo pole loudly. His old man [*laozi*] has been sitting on Yunnan and Guizhou, two provinces; I don't know how much fat and wealth of the people he has extorted. If we don't help him spend it, first, we are being unfair to his old man, second, we are being unfair to the common people of Yunnan and Guizhou!"

Wei Xiaobao laughed, "Exactly!" he said.

While they were talking, Prince Kang accompanied Wu Yingxiong coming into the hall. This Ping Xi Wang's Heir Apparent was about twenty four, twenty five years old, very handsome; he walked with vigorous and nimble steps, carrying an air of the son of a general family. Prince Kang pulled Wei Xiaobao over first; he said, "*Xiao Wangye*, this is Gui Gong-gong, the Lord of Ten Thousand Years' most capable Gong-

gong. The capture of Oboi at the Upper Study Room was mostly this Gui Gong-gong's great merit."

The number of eyes and ears Wu Sangui had sent to Beijing was really numerous. Anything that happened in the Capital, big and small, was duly reported by express courier to Kunming. Kangxi personally capturing Oboi was a first class news in the last several years, naturally Wu Yingxiong knew all the details early on. In fact, Wu Sangui had had a discussion with him, he felt that by successfully eradicating an important power without batting an eyelid, the Emperor had shown his heroic spirit despite his young age. He was afraid that his days as a feudal court official in the future would not be too good. This time Wu Yingxiong came to Beijing on his father's order to pay his respect to the Son of Heaven, he brought a large number of gifts to bribe the senior ministers, but his main purpose was to observe Kangxi's character and conducts, as well as to find out what kind of person was his most trusted minister.

Coming to Prince Kang's mansion to pay a visit today, he did not expect to see Kangxi's most favorite eunuch; he could not help but was greatly delighted. Busily he reached out with both hands to grab Wei Xiaobao's right hand and shook it repeatedly, while saying, "Gui Gong-gong, I ... *zaixia* ... [book note: he started by saying 'I', but felt it was not respectful enough; then he thought of saying 'junior' (lit. 'later generation'), but the other party was too young. If he said '*Xiongdi*', he felt he did not know him too well; if he said 'humble officer', the opposite party was not a high-ranking official of the imperial court, while he would also held the opposite party at a much higher position than himself. So in the end he decided to simply use a common Jianghu term to address oneself.] in Yunnan has heard Gong-gong's great name. When speaking with other people, *Fu Wang* [Father King] always praises His Majesty's wisdom and decisiveness; he is indeed the brilliant master, the Son of

Heaven. He also says that with the holy Son of Heaven on the throne, even a young Gong-gong such as yourself is able to set up this great merit, earning the admiration of others. *Fu Wang* instructed *zaixia* to prepare gifts to show respect to Gong-gong. It's just that according to the Great Qing law, it is inappropriate for an external official to make friends with internal officers; although *zaixia* has the time and the desire, I do not dare to rashly seek an audience with Gui Gong-gong. Today Kang *Wangye* has bestowed this good opportunity, truly my delight is unbearable." He was very articulate, his words were very pleasant to listen to.

Hearing that even such a great personality like Wu Sangui, who was ten thousands *li* away, unexpectedly had also heard about his name, Wei Xiaobao could not help but was very flattered. Luckily he was used to hearing this kind of flattery, so he was prepared on how to deal with it. "We are only servants," he said indifferently, "We merely work according to His Majesty's imperial orders. It's nothing more than, one, do not fear hardship, two, do not fear death; what great merit is worth mentioning? *Xiao Wangye* has flattered me too much." While in his heart he thought, "Songgotu *Gege* has an incredible foresight; sure enough, as soon as this little traitor see me, he mentioned the word 'gift' right away."

Wu Yingxiong was a guest from afar, he was also the Ping Xi Wang's Heir Apparent, so Prince Kang pushed him to sit on the seat of honor; and he asked Wei Xiaobao to sit on the next seat. There were a lot of high-ranking officials around the banquet table, government ministers and generals, each one was a dignitary. Although Wei Xiaobao was brassy, he did not dare to sit on the second seat; he declined repeatedly. Prince Kang laughed and said, “Gui *Xiongdi*, you are the man by His Majesty’s side, everybody reveres you in good faith to show love and respect toward His Majesty, you do not need to be polite.” While saying that, he pushed Wei Xiaobao to sit on the

chair.

By this time, Songgotu had been promoted to be the Great Learning Scholar of the Dynastic History Ministry, his rank was above everybody else, so he sat next to Wei Xiaobao. The rest of the civil and military high official sat next to each other according to their rank. Wei Xiaobao had a sudden thought, "Damn it! When the patrons of the Lovely Spring Courtyard were having a dinner party with the singsong girls, Mama would always sit behind the guests, while passing along several pieces of cake and pastry to me. Often times those turtle b@stards caught me and threw me out. At that time I always thought that when *laozi* has become rich, I will come back to the Lovely Spring Courtyard to have a dinner party with the singsong girls; I would call the old procuress, the turtle b@stards and the girls to accompany me drinking. Who would have thought that today I have a prince, an heir apparent, government ministers and generals to accompany me drinking? Too bad the Lovely Spring Courtyard's old procuress and the turtle b@stards cannot see *laozi* in this spirited appearance."

Everybody sat down to drink. The sixteen escorts Wu Yingxiong brought with him were standing by the long window. They watched attentively at the people toasting each other and eating the dishes around the banquet table, as well as the servants delivering food and serving the wine; every action and each movement did not escape their steady gaze. Wei Xiaobao had to think for a while before he suddenly understood, "Right, they must be the martial art experts from the Ping Xi Wang's palace, who come here to protect Wu Yingxiong, for fear that someone might assassinate or poison him. I am afraid Mu Palace people are already waiting outside. It would be great if there is a fierce battle later. I want to see if Mu Palace people will win, or Wu Sangui's men more formidable." His belly was filled with the desire to take pleasure in others' misfortunes; he hoped that both sides would fight an exciting battle, until both

sides suffer.

Prince Kang himself was aware of this situation, but being the host, he felt it was inappropriate to say anything. The *Shiwei Zongguan* Dolong was a martial art expert, he was also a straightforward man; after drinking several cups of wine, he said, "*Xiao Wangye*, these dozen or so escorts you bring must have been chosen from a thousand, those selected must be martial art experts."

Wu Yingxiong laughed and said, "What martial art do they have? They are just personal bodyguards in *Fu Wang*'s Palace; they have been following *Xiongdi*, they know *Xiongdi*'s temperament very well, so when I go out, I seek people I can use for my convenience. That's all."

Dolong laughed and said, "*Xiao Wangye* is too modest. Just look at those two, their *Taiyang* ['Sun acupoint', located on the temples] acupoints are bulging high, their internal energy must have reached 90% proficiency. Looking at those two, their face and neck muscles are sturdy, they must have been trained in hard, external type of martial art. And those gentlemen with shiny faces and big pigtails hanging on the back of their heads, most likely those are fake. If you tell them to take out their caps, I bet they are bald." Wu Yingxiong smiled, but did not say anything.

Songgotu laughed and said, "I only know Dolong *Zongguan* has superior martial art, I did not realize you have another skill, telling fortune by reading people's facial features."

Dolong laughed and said, "Suo *Daren* may not know this. When Ping Xi Wang was stationed in Liaodong peninsula, many military officers under his banner belonged to the Jin Ding School [lit. 'golden crown of the head' school] of Jinzhou. Disciples of Jin Ding School train a very formidable type of martial art with their heads. When they have trained to proficiency, their faces shiny, and they do not have a single

strand of hair on the top of their heads."

Prince Kang laughed and said, "I wonder if it is possible to ask the Heir Apparent to tell these honored escorts to take off their caps, to let everybody see if Dolong *Zongguan*'s speculation is accurate or not?"

Wu Yingxiong said, "Dolong *Zongguan*'s vision is like a torch, how can he be inaccurate? Indeed these several personal bodyguards have trained Jin Ding School martial art, but their skill has not reached proficiency yet, they still have quite a number of hair on their heads. If I ask them to take off their caps, they will be disgraced in public. I wish gentlemen officials will excuse us." Everybody laughed heartily, but since Wu Yingxiong was unwilling to comply, it was inappropriate for them to force him.

Wei Xiaobao could not avert his gaze from those people, his heart was unbearable itching, "I wonder how much hair that tall leader has? It looks like that thin man's martial art skill is rather lacking, perhaps he has a lot of hair." Suddenly he remembered something, "Ha!" he laughed.

With a smile Prince Kang asked, "Gui *Xiongdi*, what's so funny? Why don't you tell us?"

Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "I am thinking that the *shifu* from Jin Ding School must be very amiable; they won't fight with other people too much, even more so with people from their own school."

"How can you tell?" Prince Kang asked.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "When they get angry, they would stare at each other, then they would take their caps off. You count the hair on my head, I count the hair on your head; the one has less hair must have higher skill, the one with more hair will be forced to concede." Everybody roared in laughter; they all said that Wei Xiaobao's idea was very amusing. Wei

Xiaobao continued, "Presumably all Jin Ding School's *shifu* carry an abacus, otherwise it would be rather inconvenient to count the hair on their heads." Everybody burst out in laughter again.

A government minister was drinking a cup of wine, the wine had not entered his throat, when he heard Wei Xiaobao, the wine in his mouth spurt out; because he was afraid to spurt on the table and thus looked lacking in manners, he lowered his head and let the wine spurt onto the front of his own clothes, while coughing incessantly.

“Kang *Wangye*,” Dolong said, “Since that servant Oboi’s clique disturbed your mansion the last time, I heard that these past several months you have gathered not a few of martial art masters.”

Prince Kang slowly stroke his beard with his right hand, his face showed that he was very pleased with himself. He slowly said, “Indeed martial art masters with prestige and real skill are not easy to find. Those willing to be hired by government authorities are mostly second or third class personnel.” Pausing for a moment he continued, “On the whole *Xiao Wang* [‘little king’ – referring to self] eagerly seek people of talent; in addition to offering a large sum of money, I have to help them handle several matters, only then did I manage to invite several real top martial art masters. It’s just that they have to be well-served daily, so it takes a lot of effort. Ha ha, ha ha!”

Dolong said, “*Wangye*’s secret in engaging very able persons, may you teach me?”

Prince Kang smiled and said, “Dolong *Zongguan* is himself a martial art master, why do you need to hire martial art masters?”

“Thank you *Wangye* for your compliment,” Dolong said, “I remember that year when we had a competition among our Manchu military commanders at the presence of senior ranking

officers, presided personally by the Prince Regent, *Wangye* and *Xiao Jiang* [‘little general’ – referring to self] had obtained the Regent’s commendation. I heard this time the surviving members of Oboi’s clique came to stir up trouble, *Wangye* did not stop shooting arrows and personally killed over twenty members of the rebel party.”

Prince Kang smiled, but did not say anything. That day he did shoot some arrows and killed two Tian Di Hui members, ‘over twenty’ was obviously an exaggeration by a factor of ten.

Wei Xiaobao said, “I saw this matter with my own eyes. That time my ears only heard the random whishing sound of the arrows, while in front of me people shouting, ‘Aiyo, aiyo!’ and behind me people shouting, ‘Good shot, good shot!’”

A civil minister did not understand the meaning behind Wei Xiaobao’s words, he asked, “Gui Gong-gong, what do you mean by in front people shouting, ‘Aiyo!’ and behind people shouting, ‘Good shot!’?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Kang *Wangye*’s archery skill is ‘one hundred shots, one hundred hits’. In front, the people hit by the arrows shouted, ‘Aiyo!’, behind were our own men, praising, ‘Good shot!’. But there were several times more ‘Good shot!’ than the ‘Aiyo!’ does *Daren* know the reason?”

The minister twisted his beard with his finger, he said, “Presumably the number of people on our side was several times greater than that of the rebel party.”

“This time *Daren* has guessed incorrectly,” Wei Xiaobao said, “At that time the rebel party was carrying out a large-scale assault, Kang *Wangye* was using the few to defeat the many; there were more people on the enemy’s side. But some members of the rebel party were shot by Kang *Wangye* on the throat, so when the cry ‘Aiyo!’ reached the throat, it could not come out. Also, Kang *Wangye* shot arrows like a deity, among

the rebel party, there were many who admired him from the bottom of their hearts, so they could not refrain from shouting, ‘Good shot!’ They knew they should not shout, but they just couldn’t bear not to.”

The minister repeatedly nodded his head. “So that’s how it is,” he said.

Wu Yingxiong raised his cup and said, “Kang *Wangye*’s divine archery, junior extremely admires it. I toast *Wangye* for a cup.” Everybody raised their cups and drank to toast him.

Prince Kang was delighted, he thought, “This kid Xiao Guizi knows the facts and can find appropriate response to delicate situation, no wonder His Majesty likes him.”

“*Wangye*,” Dolong said, “You have hired that many Wulin masters in your Palace, how about inviting them out to let everybody look at them?”

Prince Kang had been wanting to show off, so he instructed his chamberlain, “Prepare two more banquet tables over here, invite Shenzhao *Shangren*[***[119]***] and the others to come out and join the banquet.”

Not too long afterwards, more than twenty people came out from the rear hall, led by a man wearing large red kasaya, a fat and tall Buddhist monk. Prince Kang stood up; he laughed and said, “Friends, let us drink a cup!” Seeing Prince Kang stood up, all the guests around the table also stood up to welcome the newcomers.

The one called Shenzhao *Shangren* clasped his palms together and said with a laugh, “We don’t dare, we don’t dare! All *Daren*, please sit down.” His voice was like resounding bell. Just by this demonstration of *chi*, it was obvious that his internal energy cultivation was very profound. As for the rest of the men, some were tall, some were short, some were handsome, some were

ugly. They sat around the two banquet tables.

Apart from possessing a good martial art skill, Dolong was also an impatient man; without waiting for the men to finish their first round of drink, he said, "*Wangye*, *Xiao Jiang* can see that each of these Wulin masters of your Palace has majestic appearance, they look formidable, their martial art skill must be extremely high; is it possible to ask these friends to display their skill? Ping Xi Wang's Heir Apparent and Gui Gong-gong are guests of honor whose presence is hard to come by, I presume they would also like to see the skill of Prince Kang Mansion's people."

Wei Xiaobao was the first to echo his words. Wu Yingxiong clapped his hands and cheered. The rest of the guests also said, "Absolutely, absolutely!"

Prince Kang laughed and said, "Friends, all these honored guests want to see your skill, I wonder if you'd like to spar with each other."

From the martial art masters' banquet table on the left a middle-aged man suddenly stood up; with a loud and clear voice he said, "I only know that Kang *Wangye* loves talented people, that's why I came here to hire myself to him; who would have thought that he only regards us as the Jianghu people who sell our skill? If all *Daren* want to see juggling monkey or tight-rope walker, why don't you go to the Bridge of Heaven? I am taking my leave!" While saying that, he raised his left hand and smashed it down on the back of his chair. 'Crash!' the back of the chair broke. He walked out toward the door in big strides. Everybody's face changed.

A thin and small old man, who was sitting on the same table as the man, suddenly flashed by and cut off in front of him. "Lang *Shifu*," the old man said, "What you say is too preposterous. *Wangye* courteously and respectfully asking us to offer our skill, if Lang *Shifu* is willing to display your skill, no

doubt it it is very good; but if you are unwilling, *Wangye* can’t possibly force you. In the Palace you make a racket, destroying the Palace’s property, even if in his magnanimity *Wangye* did not hold you responsible, but for the rest of us, brothers, where should we put our face?"

The man surnamed Lang laughed coldly and said, "Everybody has his own ambitions. Tao *Shifu* loves to show your skill in the Prince's mansion, feel free to play as much as you want. *Xiongdi* cannot accompany you too much." While saying that he took another step forward.

The old man surnamed Tao said, "If you really want to go, you need to kowtow and say goodbye to *Wangye*. If *Wangye* give you a nod, then you can leave."

The man surnamed Lang said with a cold laugh, "I didn't sell my body as a slave in the Prince's mansion, my two feet grew on my own body, I can go whenever I want to go, why do you care?" Finished speaking, he walked forward.

Unexpectedly, the old man surnamed Tao did not move; seeing the one surnamed Lang was about to bump into him, he reached out to grab his left arm, while saying, "Who knows? Perhaps I will be forced to care."

The one surnamed Lang bent his left arm downward, then suddenly jerked it upward, striking toward the old man surnamed Tao's waist. The one surnamed Tao's right leg flew up to kick the pit of his stomach. The one surnamed Lang's right hand swiftly moved toward the back of old man Tao's right leg, which by this time was high in the air. Seizing this opportunity, he pushed out, sending the old man surnamed Tao falling backward with his face up. Luckily he was quite nimble, propping himself with his right hand, he leaped back up. Although he did not fall flat on his back, he had already made a fool of himself, his old face turned entirely red. "Hey, hey," the man surnamed Lang laughed coldly, and bolted toward the door.

Suddenly a thin man appeared on the door of the hall, which was originally empty. The thin man cupped his fist and said, "Lang *Xiong*, please return."

The one surnamed Lang was moving so fast that he could not control his own momentum and crashed into the man's body. The thin man did not evade, the two of them crashed into each other. The one surnamed Lang staggered three steps backwards. He took two steps sideways to the left, but suddenly turned to the right as he dashed toward the long window on the right. As he reached the threshold, the thin man had already blocked in front of him. The one surnamed Lang knew how formidable the thin man was when he collided against him, so he did not dare to have another collision. Hastily he held his steps; his chest was no more than two *cun* away from the thin man's chest, the tip of his nose had already touched the thin man's nose. The thin man did not move at all, he did not even blink. The one surnamed Lang swiftly dodged to the left, but as soon as he regained his footing, the thin man was blocking in front of him.

The one surnamed Lang was furious, 'whoosh!' he sent a punch toward the thin man's face. The two of them stood very close to each other, plus the punch was sent with tremendous strength. The thin man did not lean sideways, he simply lowered his head. But he raised his right palm in front of his face. 'Slap!' the punch hit the center of his palm. He bent his palm slightly, the one surnamed Lang was pushed that he had to take several steps backward. The people in the hall cheered; they all praised, "Good skill!"

The one surnamed Lang looked awkward; he was unable to leave, but to go forward and fight, he realized his martial art skill was far too inferior to the opponent. Momentarily he was at a loss of what to do.

The thin man cupped his fist and said, "Lang *Xiong* please sit

down. *Wangye* instructed us to spar with each other; didn't the two of us just have a spar with each other?" Finished speaking, he immediately walked back and sat on his original seat, on the banquet table to the right. Everybody applauded again. The one surnamed Lang, with ashamed look across his face, sat down with his head hung low.

When the man surnamed Lang made a disturbance, Prince Kang had lost a considerable face; luckily this thin man returned the honor to him by compelling the one surnamed Lang to return to the martial art masters' banquet table. Prince Kang instructed his chamberlain, "Go get fifty-*tael* silver yuanbao and bring them here."

Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "This *Shifu* has an amazing martial art skill; such vicious ... vicious ... vicious tiger blocking the way [book note: the saying he wanted to say was 'vicious dog blocking the way']. That fellow was unable to get away no matter what. I wonder what is his name?"

Prince Kang stroke his sideburns, he could not remember this thin man's name, or when did this man come to the Prince's mansion; his mind was completely blank on this matter, so he laughed and said, "*Xiao Wang*'s memory is not good, I can't remember it for the time being."

Presently the chamberlain reappeared, carrying a large wooden tray, the tray was draped in red silk, with twenty pieces of fifty-*tael* big yuanbao on it. The silver was gleaming, dazzling the eyes; the tray was then set up by the Prince's side. Prince Kang laughed and said, "Gentlemen, masters of martial arts have displayed your skill, you deserve some rewards. This friend, please step forward to take one yuanbao."

The thin man came forward, and after paying his respect, he received a silver ingot from Prince Kang's hand. Wei Xiaobao asked, "Friend, what is your honorable name? And what is your great given name?"

The thin man replied, "*Xiao Ren* Qi Yuankai, thank you *Daren*, for inquiring."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Your martial art skill is very high."

Qi Yuankai said, "Enough to be laughed by *Daren*."

"The martial art masters in Kang *Wangyei*'s mansion definitely carries unsurpassed artistry," Dolong said, "We really wish to experience the skill of martial art masters under Ping Xi Wang. *Xiao Wangye*, how about selecting somebody to exchange blows with this Qi *Shifu*?" Seeing Wu Yingxiong was hesitating without replying, he added, "Naturally we will stop at touching, we must not harm our friendship; who win who lose is irrelevant."

Prince Kang was a man who loved excitement; he said, "Dolong *Zongguan* has a lofty idea, let the martial art masters of both sides exchange some pointers; the winner will enjoy two big silver yuanbao, the loser will also enjoy one. Put the yuanbao on the table."

The nineteen yuanbao were placed in front of the banquet table; the candle cast its light upon the ingots, the silver was gleaming against the red lining, it looked even more dazzling.

Prince Kang laughed and said, "My humble palace will have this Qi Yuankai *Shifu*, I wonder which *Shifu* will Ping Xi Wang Palace have?"

Everybody was in high spirits, they looked at the sixteen attendants under Wu Yingxiong. They knew that although it was a one on one martial art competition between the martial art masters, in actuality it was a gamble, the two palaces of Prince Kang and Ping Xi Wang contending with each other. Just now the thin man, Qi Yuankai, had displayed his martial art skill, and indeed he was formidable, perhaps none of Yunnan's warriors would be able to match him.

Wu Yingxiong hesitated, he did not answer. One of the sixteen

men under his leadership stepped forward, bowed to Prince Kang and said, "Reporting to *Wangye*: all of us *Xiaoren* have very low martial art skill, in no way we can match the *Shifu* of *Wangye*'s Palace. We accompany the heir apparent to Beijing, simply to attend to our heir apparent daily need. Ping Xi Wang has ordered us never to offend the attendants of all *Wangye* and ministers. This is our Ping Xi Wang's order, *Xiaoren* definitely do not dare to disobey."

Prince Kang laughed and said, "Ping Xi Wang is very prudent! But today we only practice martial art, not fighting to cause any trouble. If your *Wangye* ever ask, just tell him that I want you to do it."

The man bowed again and said, "Please forgive us, *Wangye*, we do not dare to follow your order."

Prince Kang was secretly angry, "You only regard Ping Xi Wang in your heart and do not consider me, Prince Kang. Perhaps even if His Majesty issues an imperial decree, you will not follow either." He said, "Could it be that if others punch you, you won't hit back at all?"

The man said, "Back in Yunnan, *Xiaoren* always hear that all civil and military officials, as well as soldiers and common people under the Son of Heaven are all reasonable people. We are only rural folks from faraway border area, as we come to the Capital, in everything we must yield and not offend anybody. Presumably without any rhyme or reason other people will not hit us." This man was tall and sturdy, his face carried a highly-capable look, his words was sharp; with those several sentences he was saying that if Prince Kang insisted the martial art masters under his command to provoke a fight, then Prince Kang was not a reasonable person.

Prince Kang was even more enraged, he turned his head and said, "Shenzhao *Shangren*, Qi *Shifu*, these friends from Yunnan are simply unwilling to do us the honor; there is nothing that

we can do."

Shenzhao *Shangren* laughed aloud; he stood up and said, "*Wangye*, these friends form Yunnan are simply afraid of losing, they are afraid of losing their face. I wonder if other people really hit their vital points, they won't hit back or ward off the attack?" Finished speaking, his body flashed, he had already standing by the man's side. He laughed and said, "*Pinseng*[120] only has mediocre palm strength, but compared to that friend surnamed Lang who wanted to leave but fail to leave, maybe just a little bit stronger. *Wangye*, *Pinseng* is about to break a piece of brick in your hall, won't *Wangye* be offended?"

Prince Kang knew that among his martial art masters, Shenzhao's martial art skill was the strongest, both his internal and external strength had reached perfection; hearing him said so, it was obvious that he was going to give demonstration of his skill, Prince Kang happily said, "*Shangren* may do as you wish; even if you break a hundred bricks, it is a trivial matter."

Shenzhao squatted; his left palm lightly slapped the floor. When he lifted his hand, a large greenish black brick was stuck onto his palm. This greenish black brick was about one *chi* five *cun* square [about 17 inches]; although it was not very heavy, it was firmly embedded on the floor. To be able to suck the greenish brick from the floor and stick it flat on the palm without dropping it, his palm power must be very profound. "Good!" Wei Xiaobao exclaimed loudly. Everybody else applauded.

Shenzhao showed a faint smile. Raising his left palm, he released the sucking force, immediately the greenish black brick fell down. When the brick was about level with his chest, both of his arms moved from outside to inside, his palms slapped together on the edge of the brick, 'crash!' the big greenish

black brick was smashed to smithereens; it rained down on the floor. The people cheered loudly again. Only about four, five *cun* of the greenish black brick's edge received the palm strike, but the palm power dissipated everywhere and unexpectedly able to crush the brick, with the biggest fragment was no more than one or two *cun* square; his inner power was indeed not a small matter.

Shenzhao walked toward Wu Yinxiong's attendant, putting his palms together he said, "What is your respected surname and great given name, Sire?"

The man replied, "*Dashi* ['great master' See note 14 of Chapter 8] has astonishing palm strength, you have really broadened *Xiaoren*'s horizon. *Xiaoren* is a savage person from a remote area, I am just a nameless soldier."

Shenzhao laughed and said, "So savage people from a remote area do not have name and surname?"

The man raised his eyebrows, an angry look flashed past his face, but immediately he said nonchalantly, "Even if coarse people of the mountains and plains have names, it's no more than A Mao or A Gou [lit. 'a cat' or 'a dog];' it's quite useless for *Dashi* to find out."

Shenzhao laughed and said, "Sire has a good self-control skill. Today Prince Kang is having a feast, he is surrounded by distinguished friends, it's a rare grand meeting within the Beijing city walls. *Wangye* has ordered us to show off our shortcomings, to bring laughter to *Wangye*, Heir Apparent, as well as other honored guests. Sire is determined not to grant any instruction, by doing so has swept away *Wangye* and numerous *Daren*'s keen interest; aren't you placing too much value on your status?"

The man replied, "*Zaixia* only learned a few years of countryside peasants' skill, how can I be a match for Shenzhao

Shangren of Iron Buddhist Temple of Cangzhou? If *Dashi* insists on competing, just consider *Zaixia* has lost, *Dashi* may just receive the two yuanbao reward." While saying that, he turned around to return to his place.

"Hold on!" Shenzhao shouted, "*Pinseng* has decided to try Sire's skill. With double fists' Bells and Drums sounding simultaneously, I am going to strike the Taiyang acupoints on both sides of Sire's head, please hit back!"

The man shook his head. Shenzhao let out a loud shout, the sleeves of his large red kasaya suddenly swelled as he created enough strong gust of wind, his arms swept from the outside and bent swiftly to the inside, his fists, each one as big as the mouth of a bowl, were striking toward the man's Taiyang acupoints on both sides of his head.

Just a moment ago everybody saw how he broke the greenish black brick with his palm strength; they could not help but gasping in horror, they thought since it was too late for the man to evade, if he did not parry, wouldn’t his skull be like that greenish black brick, smashed into smithereens? Who would have thought that the man did not move at all? He did not even lift his hand, neither did he lift his foot, nor move his head, nor blink his eyes; he stayed unmoving like a clay figurine or a wooden statue.

When Shenzhao *Shangren* made his move, he only wanted to force him to retaliate; he did not have any desire to take his life. As his fists were about to land on the man’s Taiyang acupoints, he saw the man was standing with blank expression on his face; his heart was alarmed, “My two fists carry about a thousand catties of force. Ping Xi Wang Heir Apparent is Prince Kang’s honored guest, if I recklessly killed his attendant, it would be greatly inappropriate.” Therefore, when his fists made contact with the man’s skin, he hastily forced his own fists upwards. ‘Whoosh!’ the fists flitted pass by the man’s temples,

while the sleeves of his monk robe brushed against his face. The man smiled slightly and said, "*Dashi* has an excellent boxing technique!"

The people in the hall all stared blankly at the scene. They thought that this man's mental strength was indeed extraordinary. If Shenzhao's fists did not change direction midway but struck the man's Taiyang acupoints instead, how could he still live at this moment? This man regarded his own life as a child's play, he was simply insane.

When Shenzhao abruptly redirected his fists, he had shaken his own arms that now his arms were sore; he could not help but staring at the man for half a day, wondering whether this man was actually a madman or an idiot. If Shenzhao went back to his seat, unavoidably he would not be able to lift his head high again. He said, "Since Sire is determined not to give me face, *Pinseng* has no choice but to offend you. The next punch is the Black Tiger Snatching the Heart, I am going to strike the pit of Sire's stomach."

The moves Bells and Drums Sounding Simultaneously and Black Tiger Snatching the Heart were both very rudimentary fist techniques, those who learned martial art for several months would have practiced these moves. Before launching the attack he shouted the name first, it was to show that he intended to score victory by relying on his strength; but by using the shallowest technique, he was also showing contempt toward the opponent.

The man showed a faint smile without answering at all. Shenzhao was inwardly very angry; he mused, "This punch of mine is going to inflict internal injury on you; you won't die immediately on the spot, but you'll die three, four days later, so I can't be considered sweeping away Ping Xi Wang's face." Striking a horse stand, he let out a loud shout while sending his right punch with a strong gust of wind. 'Smack!' the punch hit

the pit of the man’s stomach.

The man’s body swayed, he took a step back as he laughed and said, “*Dashi* has won. I was forced to take a step back."

Although Shenzhao did not put forth his entire strength in this punch, the power behind it was very severe; unexpectedly it was as if the man did not feel anything, he spoke those words lightly, without any difficulty at all. Obviously, he did not sustain any injury. The civil officials among the guests did not understand this reasoning, but those who practiced martial art all knew that the man had intentionally yielded to Shenzhao. Wei Xiaobao was neither a civil nor military; he was in between ‘appeared to understand but does not really understand’.

Shenzhao was proud to have quite a prestige in Wulin, how could he accept a victory like this? A faint layer of dark color rose up on his face; he said, “In that case, eat my fist again.” ‘Whoosh!’ he sent another punch, still striking toward the pit of that man’s stomach. This time he was using 70% of his strength. Even if the man were hit and spurted blood from his mouth, it was he who asked for trouble, Shenzhao did not have any choice.

When Shenzhao's punch reached the front piece of the man's jacket, the man's chest suddenly shrank, his body floated backward for about half a *zhang*, as if he was he was jolted by the power of the punch, while actually he was evading the punch. His attacked hit an empty space, Shenzhao's anger grew. He rushed forward two steps, and with a loud shout his right leg flew up ferociously to kick the man's lower abdomen. "Aiyo!" the man cried out, it seemed like the kick was going to hit him.

As if by prior agreement all the people stood up, only to see the man's body was bent backward; it was like his two feet were being nailed to the ground, his body was bent at the knee, he fell backward with face up, hence most of his body was like a

wooden log hanging horizontally in the air, only about a *chi* away from the floor. Shenzhao's kick hit an empty air, about several *cun* above the man's legs.

Shenzhao was in quandary, he had to either give up, or go through to the end; in Mandarin Duck Chain Kicks style, using the Black Dragon Sweeps the Earth his left leg swept across toward the man's shinbone. Without changing his posture - he was still in the Iron Panel Bridge position, his feet kicked the ground, his whole body flew up one *chi.* Shenzhao's leg swept pass the sole of his feet. The man fell back down steadily, he still had not stood straight.

The people in the hall broke into a thunderous applause. With this turn of events, Shenzhao realized that his martial art skill was still inferior to that man's by a considerable margin. If the opponent had hit him back, he would have been beaten silly. Without any choice he put his palms together and said, "Good skill! My utmost admiration!"

The man straightened up, he bowed to return the propriety and said, "*Dashi*'s fists and kicks carried tremendous strength, *Zaixia* did not dare to fend off, and was forced to evade."

Prince Kang said, "Both gentlemen have an extremely high martial art skill. His Highness Heir Apparent's attendant is very polite, he was determined not to fight back; hence the martial art competition cannot be continued. Come, both of you take two yuanbao each."

The man bowed and said, "I don't get a reward I don't deserve."

Seeing the man was unwilling to take the yuanbao, Shenzhao felt it was inappropriate for him to step forward to claim his reward. Prince Kang turned to his chamberlain and said, "Send the reward to both gentlemen." The man thanked the Prince and accepted the money, Shenzhao also embarrassedly

received his.

Prince Kang was fully aware that although the martial art contest a moment ago was not official, actually his side had already lost. He bestowed two big silver yuanbao to Shenzhao was only to cover up Shenzhao embarrassment, and also he stated that neither one win nor lose to conceal his own shortcomings. In his heart was still unwilling to concede, and the fight had not satisfied his craving; he thought, "Admittedly, this tall guy's martial art skill is not bad, but I am sure the rest of Wu Yingxiong's attendants are not as good as he is. The martial art masters under my command have astonishing skill, just look at that Qi Yuankai, perhaps his martial art level is almost the same as that Shenzhao monk." Originally he addressed Shenzhao as '*Shangren*', after the display of his martial art just now, in his eyes, he had already discounted Shenzhao from '*Shangren*' to *'heshang'* [Buddhist monk]. In loud and clear voice he said, "The contest just now cannot be continued, unavoidably it was a little … a little disappointing in something otherwise perfect. Qi Shifu, please invite fifteen martial art masters, everybody take a weapon, sixteen against sixteen, have a spar with sixteen attendants Ping Xi Wang Heir Apparent brought with him. *Xiao Wangye*, please tell them to show their weapons!"

Wu Yingxiong said, "We come to *Wangye*'s palace as guests, how can we dare to bring our weapons?"

Prince Kang laughed and said, "Heir Apparent is too polite. Your honored father and *Xiao Wang* were military commanders, throughout our lives we eke out a living amidst the sabers, spears, swords and halberds, we need not observed this old-womanish taboo. Come, get the eighteen weapons, some of each, and bring them here, let the martial art masters of Ping Xi Wang choose." Prince Kang was a combat general, he fought from outside the Great Wall into the Central Plains; in his

mansion there were all kinds of weapons. As soon as he shouted the order, his attendants immediately brought a big pile of weapons, long and short, out, and put them all in front of the sixteen Heir Apparent's escorts.

Qi Yuankai chose fourteen martial art masters, but he asked Shenzhao to be their leader. Shenzhao wanted to win back his face, so he uttered some polite words, but he did not decline. He thought, "In any case I need to chop and injure some southern barbarians to vent the resentment in my heart." The fact that Ping Xi Wang was their honored guest and that he must give careful consideration to his face, and so on and so forth, had long ago vanished from his thought.

Shenzhao, Qi Yuankai, and the others got their weapons and followed the attendants returning to the hall. Shenzhao had a pair of blue steel Jie Dao [Buddhist's saber] in his hands. He went over to Prince Kang's banquet table and put his palms together in salute. Prince Kang and the others slightly leaned their bodies forward and nodded to return the courtesy.

Wei Xiaobao was very proud of himself, "Damn it," he thought, "These people are all exceptionally skillful in martial arts, they all are big names in Jianghu, yet they still come to *laozi* to salute. *Laozi* only sitting haughtily, nodding my head to settle the matter; compared to them, my prestige is ten times more impressive."

Shenzhao turned around and loudly said, "Friends from Yunnan, go get your weapons!"

The tall man who had received his five moves earlier said, "We have received Ping Xi Wang's order, we must not fight with anybody inside the city of Beijing."

Shenzhao said, "When other people's saber is blowing to your head, will you still not fight back? Other people want to chop your head, you will simply stretch out your neck? Or will you

shrink your head into your neck?”

As soon as he said those words, all Ping Xi Wang’s Palace escorts showed an angry look. Saying that they shrink their heads into their necks was just the same as cursing them as turtles. But the tall leader still spoke indifferently, “Ping Xi Wang’s military order is like a mountain. If we disobey the military order, when we return to Yunnan, it will be the same, we’ll have our heads chopped off.”

“Fine,” Shenzhao said, “We’ll see.” He beckoned the other fifteen masters of martial art to gather in a corner of the hall and conversed in low voice. Shenzhao quietly said, “We’ll move our weapons towards their vital points, let’s see if they will still not fight back?”

Qi Yuankai said, “It will be inappropriate if we injure them. We will simply force them to fight back.”

Another man said, “We must be a little more careful.”

Shenzhao shouted, “Alright, let’s fight!” Letting out a long whistle, he brandished his Jie Dao. White rays flashing, as he was the first to charge toward the sixteen Ping Xi Wang’s escorts. The other fifteen men, some using swords, some sticking out their short spears, some brandishing their steel whip, some raising their copper hammer, sixteen different weapons charged together.

Unexpectedly, the sixteen escorts only stood motionless, with arms hanging down and palms kept close to their thighs, their eyes looked straight forward, as if they did not see the attack of those sixteen masters of martial art of Prince Kang’s mansion.

Seeing their opponents were motionless, those sixteen masters of martial art showed off their skill in front of Prince Kang and the guests. Each of them displayed their most ingenious moves of their respective weapons, hacking diagonally, thrusting straight, cutting down, striking

horizontally; the blades reflecting the candlelight as the sixteen weapons danced with loud gusts of wind, forming a canopy of light, surrounding the sixteen escorts in the middle.

The civil officials repeatedly said, “Careful, careful!” The military officers noticed that every weapon was threatening the opponent’s vital points, oftentimes it was only several *cun* away from its target. They only needed to exert a fraction more of their strength, then they would have taken the opponent’s life. The officers were all apprehensive.

The sixteen escorts fixed their gaze forward, they gave no thought to their own life or death; if the opponents really wanted to take their lives, they would have given their lives without a fight.

Shenzhao and the others moved their weapons faster and faster, occasionally the weapons would collide with each other, sparks flew everywhere, clanking sounds were heard, the situation grew more and more dangerous. Although they did not want to intentionally hurt Ping Xi Wang’s subordinates, but as the swords, sabers, whips and hammers collided with each other, not only the weapons carried great forces with them, they were also so close to each other, so it was just a matter of time before the weapons would bounce and injure someone.

Sure enough, ‘smack!’ an iron mace collided with another man’s copper hammer, and ricocheted toward a Ping Xi Wang escort’s shoulder. Following closely, someone’s saber hacked slantingly down, it flitted across, just a few *cun* away from the right side of an escort’s face, someone by his side happened to cut down with a sword; the saber and sword collided, the saber bounced slightly and cut the escort’s face. Instantly blood flowed from a long cut of his face. The injury of these two escorts was not light, still they did not utter a single groan, still they stood motionless.

Prince Kang realized that if this thing continued, there would

be more wounded people, but he was also somewhat disappointed that the martial art contest could not continue. He shouted, “Good martial arts! Good martial arts! Everybody hold your hands!”

Shenzhao let out a loud shout, his pair of Jie Dao swept horizontally across, knocking the hat off of an escort’s head. The rest of his men followed suit, one after another sabers, spears, swords and halberds knocked the escorts’ hats off. The sixteen martial art masters laughed aloud, pulled back their weapons, and then leaped back off.

Wei Xiaobao saw that among the escorts there were seven men who were bald, their shiny heads gleaming under the light; he could not help clapping his hands and laughed heartily, “Dolong *Zongguan*,” he said, “Your guess is really accurate, they are really a bunch of bald …” before he finished, he took a glance and saw the sixteen escorts of Ping Xi Wang Palace were still standing motionless, but their faces showed an extreme anger, their eyes looked like they were spouting fire.

Since he was little Wei Xiaobao had mingled with people of the marketplace, naturally he was very familiar with the way of hoodlums, he felt that the action of Shenzhao and the others were very inappropriate, they did not leave even half a face to the others. Although the rogues and hoodlums of the marketplace stole, robbed, swindled, and did all kinds of shameless deeds, but when they were fighting, they always left 30% of leeway; north and south of the great river, everywhere was the same. When a patron of the brothel was infatuated with a girl and splurged ten of thousand *taels* on her, the old procuress would give him back several tens of *taels* as travel expenses, so that he would not wander destitute in a foreign land, or perhaps in desperation would hang himself or throw himself in the river. It was not because those hoodlums had a really good conscience, but rather to avoid the matter being

escalated and might bring trouble in the future.

When gambling, Wei Xiaobao often used tricks to clean up his opponent's money, but suppose he won one *tael*, he would in the end let him win back one or two coins, if he won one hundred *wen*, he would in the end let him win back ten or twenty *wen*. In one hand, so that next time he would still do business with him, on the other hand, it was to avoid the other party get suspicious, or to avoid the other party became angry out of shame, and drew out his fists to beat him.

Looking at Ping Xi Wang Palace escorts' expression, Wei Xiaobao felt very apologetic in his heart, so he promptly left his seat and went over to them. He stooped down in front of the tall man to pick up his hat and said, "*Lao Xiong* is really amazing." With both hands he put the hat back on him.

The man bowed and said, "Thank you very much!"

Immediately afterwards Wei Xiaobao picked all fifteen hats one by one, he said with a laugh, "By doing this, aren't they offending friends?" He was not sure which hat belonged to whom, so he held the hats in his hands and let each one of them picked and put it on themselves.

These escorts saw that Wei Xiaobao was sitting by their Palace's Heir Apparent, he was the honored guest whom Prince Kang invited this time, the Gui Gong-gong who arrested Oboi; seeing that he personally picked up the hats, they all cupped their fists and repeatedly said, "We don't dare, *Xiaoren* do not deserve it!"

At first Wei Xiaobao did not have the least bit of favorable impression toward these Ping Xi Wang Palace's people, he was hoping Wu Sangui's subordinates would fall flat on their faces, but after being forced repeatedly by Shenzhao and the others, yet all along these people were tolerating them; thus they had aroused Wei Xiaobao's spirit in wiping out the bullies and help

the down-trodden. Seeing their appreciation seemed to be very sincere, he was even happier. Turning his head to Prince Kang he said, "*Wangye*, I wonder if I can borrow several *taels* from you."

Prince Kang laughed and said, "Gui *Xiongdi* can use anything freely. Will fifty thousand *taels* enough?"

Wei Xiaobao replied with a laugh, "Why would I need that much?" Toward a chamberlain of the Prince's mansion he said, "Quickly go buy sixteen best hats, the faster the better!" The chamberlain complied and left.

Wu Yingxiong cupped his fist and said, "Gui Gong-gong love the house and its crow, *zaixia* is deeply grateful."

Wei Xiaobao cupped his fist to return the politeness, while saying in his heart, "What love the house and its crow? If there is any crow, wouldn't it be you, this little turtle?"

When Prince Kang saw Shenzhao and the others knocked down the Ping Xi Wang Palace escorts' hats, he had already felt that it was a bit too much, he was afraid Wu Yingxiong might be offended, but to open his mouth to apologize, he also felt that it was inappropriate. Therefore, Wei Xiaobao's action closely resembled his own heart's desire. He said, "Attendants, reward Heir Apparent Wu's subordinates fifty *taels* each." He then thought, "If I only rewarded the other side, wouldn't I make my own martial art master subordinates lose face?" So he added, "Our own Palace's sixteen martial art masters will also receive fifty *taels* reward each!" The hall was abuzz with joyful noise.

Songgotu rose up and poured drink for everybody on the banquet table, he said, "*Xiao Wangye*, your esteemed father employs the troops like a deity; today I have seen it, sure enough, the name is not in vain. Your esteemed father's military order is stern; making everybody always ready to give their lives, no wonder he triumphs in every battle and wins every

fight. Come, come, come, let us all toast Ping Xi Wang a cup!”

Wu Yingxiong hurriedly stood up; raising his cup he said, “Junior solemnly drinks the toast on my father’s behalf; thank you gentlemen, for your generous kindness.” Everybody raised their cups and drank. Wu Yingxiong added, “In guarding the southern border, bringing peace and order to the frontier, my father depends on the Holy One’s great fortune and the appropriate arrangement of princes and dukes, as well as the senior ministers of the imperial court, who give directions to do things right. My father only serves to display utter loyalty to His Imperial Majesty; he receives instructions from princes and dukes, as well as the senior ministers of the imperial court, and does not dare to be idle. We do not dare to claim any merit.” After a few more rounds of wine, the Prince’s mansion’s chamberlain returned with sixteen hats, which he held with both hands and presented them in front of Wei Xiaobao.

Wei Xiaobao turned to Prince Kang and said with a laugh, “*Wangye*, your Palace’s Shifu have accidentally knocked off other people’s hats; you ought to compensate them with new hats.”

Prince Kang laughed and said, “I should, I should. Gui *Xiongdi* is very thoughtful.” He ordered his chamberlains to present the hats to Wu Yingxiong’s escorts.

The escorts received the hats and bowed, they said, “Thank you *Wangye*, thank you Gui Gong-gong!” They folded the hats and put them inside their pockets, while still wearing the old hat on their heads. Prince Kang and Songgotu looked at each other, they were aware that these people did not put on the new hats out of respect to Wu Yingxiong.

After another round of drink, the theatrical troupe in the Prince’s mansion came out to present their skill. Prince Kang asked Wu Yingxiong to select a play. Wu Yingxiong chose ‘Man Chuang Hu’ [bed full of tablets, ‘hu’ is tablet held at an

audience], a lively story about Guo Ziyi celebrating his birthday, his seven sons and eight son-in-laws came to congratulate him. Guo Ziyi was a man of riches and honor, also a long-lived scholar, he came to a good end by his scholarly achievement in imperial exams, who was extremely revered by the ruler and his ministers. Wu Yingxiong chose this story to congratulate Prince Kang, but also to compare his own father, Wu Sangui, to the character of the story; it was quite a fitting play.

After he chose a play, Prince Kang gave the playlist to Wei Xiaobao. "Gui *Xiongdi*," he said, "You also choose a story."

Wei Xiaobao did not recognize any character on the playlist; he laughed and said, "I can't choose. *Wangye*, please select a story for me, a martial art play with fighting and sturdy stick."

Prince Kang laughed and said, "Gui *Xiongdi* loves to watch military vigor. Um, we'll choose the play about a young hero defeating a grownup, just like *Xiao Xiongdi* arresting Oboi. Right, we'll select 'Bai Shui Tan' [beach of clear water], the young hero was an eleven years old youth, he fought and completely routed the Green Faced Tiger."

When 'Man Chuang Hu' and 'Bai Shui Tan' were over, the third play was 'You Yuan Jing Meng' [roaming the garden after awakened from a dream], where two female impersonators singing 'Ah, Ah' endlessly. Wei Xiaobao did not understand what they were saying, he got impatient so he stood up and left the banquet table. He saw in the side hall there were several tables where people were gambling, some played cards, some other played dice. The banker on the dice table was a military officer, a subordinate of Prince Kang. In front of him there was a big pile of his winning money. Seeing Wei Xiaobao walked near, he said with a laugh, "Gui Gong-gong, would you like to try your hand?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed, "Alright!" he said. He glanced over and saw the tall man, Wu Yingxiong's subordinate, was standing on

the side. Wei Xiaobao had a rather favorable impression of this man, so he beckoned him to come.

The man rushed forward a step and said, “What instruction does Gui Gong-gong have?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “There is no father and son on the gambling table, you do not need to be polite. *Lao Ge* [old older brother], what’s your honorable surname? With what great name must I address you?”

A moment ago, Shenzhao asked him and he was unwilling to answer, but Wei Xiaobao had given them a lot of face in front of the guests, plus he was asking politely, so he said, “*Xiaoren* is surnamed Yang, I am called Yang Yizhi.”

Wei Xiaobao did not know the meaning of his name, ‘Yizhi’, but he blurted out what was in his mind, “Good name, good name! The Yang family has the largest number of heroes, Yang Lao Ling Gong, Yang Liulang [lit. ‘Old Honorable Commander Yang’ and ‘Sixth son (or youth) Yang’, respectively], Yang Zongbao, Yang Wenguang, Yang family warriors are all heroes. Yang *Dage*, let us two boys become partner in gambling!”

Hearing Wei Xiaobao praising Yang family ancestors, Yang Yizhi was very happy; he smiled and said, “*Xiaoren* does not know much how to gamble.”

“What are you afraid of?” Wei Xiaobao said, “I’ll teach you! Get those two big yuanbao out.”

Yang Yizhi took the two big yuanbao Prince Kang bestowed to him earlier out. From his pocket Wei Xiaobao fished out a banknote; he placed it on the table and said with a laugh, “This Yang *Xiong* and I are partners, we bet one hundred *taels*!”

The banker laughed and said, “Good, the more the better!” They were gambling with two dice, one throw to determine the winner. The banker threw first and got ‘zhang hu pai’ [sorry, I can’t find any reference on this], Wei Xiaobao tossed the dice

and got seven dots, thus his hundred *taels* was lost.

Wei Xiaobao said, “We’ll bet another hundred *taels*!” This time he won.

After throwing for sixteen, seventeen times, come and go, they neither won nor lost. Wei Xiaobao was getting impatient, “It’s not a big deal if I lose several hundred *taels*, but if I implicate this surnamed Yang that he loses those two yuanbao, I am letting him down.” His next throw produced six dots, he was ninety percent sure he would lose; who would have thought that the banker tossed five dots? Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud; hereafter he repeatedly won several times. One hundred *taels* became two hundred; two hundred *taels* became four hundred. In three throws of the dice, he won four hundred *taels*.

The military officer who was the banker laughed and said, “Gui Gong-gong has good gambling luck.”

Wei Xiaobao replied with a laugh, “You say I have good gambling luck? Let’s try again, then!” He pushed the entire four hundred *taels* to the table and threw the dice; he got four and six, the banker threw and got a long three, so he lost. Wei Xiaobao turned his head and said, “Yang *Dage*, shall we continue betting or not?”

“I rely on Gui Gong-gong’s idea,” Yang Yizhi replied.

Wei Xiaobao added the original four hundred *taels* he had to compensate for the four hundred *taels* he just lost, he put eight hundred *taels* altogether and said with a laugh, “I want some refreshing gambling experience.” He shouted, “Compensate my loss!”

The dice were tossed; they rolled around chaotically, after a moment, one rolled and became six dots, but the other one was still rolling continuously. Wei Xiaobao had secretly exerted his strength, he wanted the dice to show double-six, which was

called ‘the Heaven’. But the dice were not his, his throwing skill had not been brought to the point of perfection. The second die finally stopped, it showed two dots, for the total of eight dots, so most likely he would lose. Wei Xiaobao rained curses, “Straight your mother’s stinky dice, why don’t you help me?”

The banker laughed heartily, “Gui Gong-gong,” he said, “I am afraid this time I am going to eat yours.” He tossed the dice. One showed a five-dot, the other was still rolling continuously.

Wei Xiaobao shouted, “Two, two, two!” If the die showed a one, it would become one five, a three dots would become eight, eight would defeat the eight, the banker won. If four dots, the total would be nine, if five dots, it would become a plum blossom, if six dots, it would become an ‘ox head’. All these combinations would beat his eight; only if it showed two dots would the banker lose. Wei Xiaobao did not stop yelling; but as luck would have it, the die rolled several more times, then stopped inside the bowl, it really showed two dots.[121]

Wei Xiaobao was delighted; he laughed and said, “General, your gambling luck today is not too good.”

The officer laughed and said, “Banker’s bad luck, banker’s bad luck. It was because Gui Gong-gong giving the order. Whatever your heart wishes, your hands accomplish; naturally I can’t beat you in gambling.” He paid Wei Xiaobao three banknotes, two hundred *taels* each, plus two yuanbao, worth one hundred *taels* each.

Wei Xiaobao rubbed the sweat on his palms, he laughed and said, “I receive the benefit of the light!” To Yang Yizhi he said, “Yang *Dage*, we lack the prospect of picking up green fruits; let’s stop gambling.” While squeezing eight hundred *taels* to Yang Yizhi’s hand.

For no rhyme or reason Yang Yizhi received a sudden wealth, his heart was overjoyed; “Gui Gong-gong,” he said, “What is

that general's name?"

Wei Xiaobao was startled; he replied in low voice, "I haven't asked." Turning his head over toward the officer, he asked, "Great General, your honorable surname and your great given name?"

The military officer beamed from ear to ear, he stood up and respectfully replied, "Reporting to Gui Gong-gong: *Xiao Jiang* Jiang Baizheng, Regional Commander of the Office of Record, I have always been serving under Prince Kang's banner."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "General Jiang, fighting wars you are ever-victorious, but in gambling you are not too successful."

Jiang Baizheng laughed and said, "When gambling with others, more or less *Xiao Jiang* can also be considered ever-victorious. It's just that there will be a stronger hand among the strong, plus today I met Gong-gong, Jiang Baizheng has turned into Jiang Baibai[122]."

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and walked away. Suddenly he thought, "Why did that surnamed Yang want me to ask the banker's name?" While he was pondering, from a distant he watched that fellow Jiang Baizheng's technique in throwing the dice. He saw how he lifted the dice, shifted his wrist, bending his finger, and threw the dice; it was an extremely skilled technique, truly he was a first-class gambling expert in Jianghu. When gambling with him a while ago, Wei Xiaobao did not pay any attention. Suddenly it dawned on him, "Turns out this fellow was deliberately losing to me, no wonder I had won five times in a row, where have I had such a gambling luck? Damn it, *laozi* has a lot of money, I don't care about winning or losing, otherwise once I was at the table, I would have seen it. That Yunnan fellow surnamed Yang also understands the trick, he is not a 'cattle' either, he is a 'sheep killer'."

He thought further, “Why would a total stranger Regional Commander of the Office of Record wanted to lose money intentionally to me? Naturally it was because I have a face in front of the Emperor, everybody hopes I would say good words on their behalf. Or even if I don’t speak good words, at least I won’t pound on their eggs. F*ck your granny, he spent one thousand four hundred *taels* just to win *laozi*’s favor; it’s very cheap!”

Now that he knew people would deliberately lose to him, that victory was easy, he did not want to gamble anymore. Returning to the banquet hall, he ate some dishes and watched the opera. By this time they were playing ‘Si Fan’ [considering the mundane/material world], where a Buddhist nun was acting and singing, while the people on the side constantly cheering and applauding. Wei Xiaobao did not understand what kind of trick she was playing, he felt extremely bored, so he stood up.

Prince Kang laughed, “*Xiao Xiongdi*, what do you want to play?” he asked, “No need to be polite, do not hesitate to give your instruction.”

Wei Xiaobao replied, “I am going to find something fun to do myself, please do not be polite.” He saw at the corridor people were shouting noisily, the gambling was very lively, his heart was itching a little bit, but he thought, “What the eye doesn’t see, the heart doesn’t grieve over; I am not going to gamble today.”

From the last time he visited to Prince Kang’s mansion, he still vaguely remembered the layout of the Palace, so he walked toward the rear hall.

Everywhere in the Palace lanterns and candles were brilliantly lit. When the people of the Prince’s mansion saw him, they would stand up respectfully with hands hanging on their side. Wei Xiaobao strolled leisurely; suddenly he had an urge to urinate, yet he did not wish to ask anybody where the lavatory

was. He saw there was a small garden on his left, so he shoved the long window open and walked into a dark corner. He pulled his pants down and was about to urinate when suddenly from the other side of the flower bushes he heard some people spoke in low voices.

Someone said, “Give me the money first, then I’ll take you in.”

Another man said, “Take me in first, after I find that thing, naturally your money won’t decrease the least bit.”

The former man said, “Money first, goods later. If after getting the goods you don’t give me the money, where can I go to find you?”

The other man said, “Alright, here is a thousand *taels*, I give you a 10% prepayment.”

Wei Xiaobao’s heart was moved, “One thousand *taels* is only 10%? What kind of important goods is that?” Instantly he endured the urge to urinate and bent his ear to listen.

He heard the first person said, “Fifty percent prepayment, otherwise this deal is off. This is a ‘removing-head’ important matter, you think it is amusing?”

The other man hesitated slightly, then he said, “Fine, here are banknotes worth five thousand *taels*, you may take it first.”

“Thank you very much,” the first person said. There was rustling noise as the banknotes were being counted, and then he said, “Follow me!”

Wei Xiaobao’s curiosity was piqued, he mused, “Whatever ‘removing-head’ important matter it is, I cannot not follow them to take a look.” He heard the footsteps of those two men were heading west, so he slipped out of the flowering bush to follow them from a distance. He saw the back of those two men as they walked evasively among the flowering shrubs and trees;

they stopped after every few *zhang* and looked around to see if anybody saw them. Wei Xiaobao thought, "They are so sneaky, whatever it is they are doing, it must not be a good thing. Prince Kang has treated me really well, I'll show him my, Gui Gong-gong's way of doing things by catching two incorrigible thieves for him tonight." First, he felt the dagger, which could cut iron like mud, hidden in his boot; second, he felt the vest he was wearing, the treasured vest which even sabers and spears could not penetrate, and then his courage was boosted somewhat.

He saw the two men walked through the garden and entered an exquisite looking cottage. Wei Xiaobao walked on tiptoe to come near; he saw lantern light penetrated the flower-carved window lattice. Walking around toward the rear window, he moistened his finger with his saliva to wet the window paper, and then peeked inside with one eye through the hole. He saw the room was a shrine to worship Buddha, with an image of Tathagata Buddha sitting on the offering table, and an oil lantern in front of the image. A man dressed in servant attire said in low voice, "I spent more than a year just to find the location of this thing, your ten thousand *taels* is not an easy money."

The other man, whose back was facing Wei Xiaobao, asked, "Where is it?"

"Give it to me first!" the servant said.

The other man turned around and said, "Give you what?" This man had a thin face, he was none other than Qi Yuankai, who a moment ago blocked that martial art master surnamed Lang from leaving the main hall.

The servant said with a laugh, "Qi *Shifu* is asking something that you already know the answer, naturally I am talking about the five thousand *taels*."

"You are really formidable," Qi Yuankai said. He pulled a bundle of banknotes from his pocket. The servant examined the banknotes one by one under the lamp light.

Wei Xiaobao was very scared; he knew that Qi Yuankai's martial art skill was very high, plus whatever they were doing must be a shady business with a very heavy responsibility, if his presence was detected, they might kill him immediately to close his mouth. In his fright, his pee flowed out. He thought he might as well let the nature take its course, by letting the pee flowed along his thigh to the ground without making the least bit of noise.

After counting the banknotes, the servant laughed and said, "Correct." Lowering his voice, he whispered on Qi Yuankai's ear. Qi Yuankai nodded repeatedly, but Wei Xiaobao was unable to hear even a single sentence.

He saw Qi Yuankai suddenly leaped up vertically onto the sacrificial table. Turning his head around to look, he then reached out to feel around the Buddha image's left ear. He moved his finger for a while, and then pulled out a tiny object. He jumped back down and raised his hand to look at the object under the candlelight; it was a key, glittering yellow under the light, presumably it was cast from gold. The key was about the length of a small finger, it couldn't be more than a *liang* [50 grams] of gold.

Qi Yuankai was beaming from ear to ear. Then he looked down to count the bricks, about a dozen or more bricks horizontally, and a dozen or more bricks vertically. He stooped down to pull a dagger from his boot, and then used the dagger to pry open a square brick; he cheered in a low voice.

The servant said, "Genuine goods at fair prices, I did not swindle you!"

Qi Yuankai did not reply, he gently inserted the golden key

downward; presumably there was a keyhole underneath the square brick. 'Click!' the lock opened. Qi Yuankai looked stunned, he said, "How come it won't open? Perhaps it is the wrong key."

The servant said, "Why can't you open it? *Wangye* personally unlocked it, I saw it clearly from outside the window." While saying that, he bent down and got hold of something and pulled it out.

Suddenly there was a swishing noise, a crossbow mechanism shot up from below, and hit the servant at the pit of his stomach. "Ah!" the servant cried out pitifully and fell backward, the iron lid he was holding in his hand flew up. Qi Yuankai leaned sideways and reached out to catch the iron lid so that it would not fall to the ground and create a lot of noise. Squatting behind the servant, he pressed down the servant's mouth using his right hand to guard against him crying out and alarm other people, while with his left hand he grabbed the servant's left wrist and used the servant's hand to grope around the hole.

Wei Xiaobao was stunned to see this; he thought, "Turns out there is another mechanism in the hole. This man surnamed Qi is really formidable."

This time the crossbow mechanism no longer shoot any arrows. Qi Yuankai used his own hand to fish out something, it was a bundle wrapped in cloth. With his right hand he flung the servant to the floor; he rose up, lifted his right foot up and stepped on the servant's mouth to prevent him from making any noise. And then he leaned forward to put the bundle on the sacrificial table and opened it.

Wei Xiaobao took a very deep breath; he saw that the object inside the bundle was a scripture. From the millions scriptures in the world, Wei Xiaobao could only read the title of one scripture, which is the ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’, and this book was precisely the ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’. The size and shape

of this book was identical to the ones he got from Oboi's mansion, only the envelope was made of red silk.

Qi Yuankai quickly re-wrapped the scripture in its original cloth wrapper; lifting up his left foot, he stepped forcefully on the arrow's tail. With a light 'Puff!' the crossbow's arrow went deep into the servant's chest. The servant was already seriously injured, naturally this arrow killed him instantly. Since Qi Yuankai's right foot was stepping on his mouth, only a muffled 'humph' was heard; his body convulsed a little bit, then he stopped moving altogether.

Wei Xiaobao was so terrified that his heart was thumping hard. Actually he had finished urinating, but this time he could not help but peeing again in his pants.

He saw Qi Yuankai bending down to take the banknotes from the servant's pocket, which he then put into his own pocket. With a cold laugh he said, "Now you can get rich!" After hesitating for a moment, he placed the golden key in the servant's dead body's right palm, and curled the dead body's fingers to hold the key; only then did he rush out in quick steps.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "He is about to run away, must I raise the alarm now?"

Suddenly a shadow flashed, Qi Yuankai was already on the roof. Wei Xiaobao shrank his body as small as possible, he did not dare to make the slightest move; he only heard the sound of roof tiles being moved around. A moment later, Qi Yuankai leaped down and haughtily walked away.

"Right," Wei Xiaobao thought, "He is hiding the sutra under the tile, he will be back later to pick it up. Humph, it won't be that easy."

He waited for a while, until Qi Yuankai had left far away. He did not have the ability to leap up to the roof, but he could climb

up the pillar of the corridor. Pulling himself up the eaves, he managed to flip his body onto the roof. Remembering where the tile noise came from, he overturned about a dozen roof tiles before under the hazy darkness of the night he saw the corner of the cloth-wrapper.

He took out the bundle and put the tiles back in place. "Why is this ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’ so valuable?" he mused, "The old turtle, the Empress Dowager, this man surnamed Qi, and then Oboi, Prince Kang; they all treated this book as a priceless treasure. If I, Wei Xiaobao, did not take advantage by seizing this undeserved fortune, I am carrying this surname Wei in vain." Untying the cloth-wrapper, he stuffed the sutra flat against his waist and tightened his belt over it. His gown was spacious to begin with; surprisingly the book was not visible at all. After throwing the cloth wrapper into the flowering shrubs, he returned to the main hall.

The hall was exactly the same as it had been when he left; those who were gambling were still gambling, those who were listening to the song were still listening to the song, the female impersonator who played the Buddhist nun was still coyly singing endlessly. Wei Xiaobao asked Songgotu, "This woman putting on an act like that, what trick is she playing?"

Songgotu replied with a laugh, "This little nun is thinking about a man in the monastery, she wants to run away, going down the mountain to marry; just look at her face, it is overflowing with the thoughts of love, she is throwing coquettish glances one by one ..." Suddenly he remembered that Wei Xiaobao was an eunuch, he must not talk about the matter between men and women too much, or else he would upset him; thereupon he said, "This play is not too interesting, Gui Gong-gong (although the two of them were sworn brothers, in front of other people they must not address each other as brother), let me select another play for you. Um, how about 'Ya

Guan Lou' [elegant and tasteful upstairs room], Li Cunxiao beats the tiger; a young hero, it was not a small matter.

Afterwards we can watch the 'Zong Kui Jia Mei' [Zhong Kui[123] marries off his younger sister]. Zhong Kui's subordinates, the five little demons, doing acrobatic and fighting, it is very lively."

Wei Xiaobao clapped his hands and cheered. "But I have to return to the Palace," he said, "I am afraid I don't have time."

Casting a sidelong glance, he saw Qi Yuankai was in the middle of playing the finger-guessing game with another martial art master, 'The Brightest and the Best of Five Confucianism Classics', 'Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea', shouting and yelling noisily. After playing for a while, he asked in loud voice, "Shenzao Shangren, where is that fellow surnamed Lang?"

The martial art masters around the banquet table said, "We haven't seen him for quite a while, perhaps he has slipped out."

With a cold laugh Shenzao said, "That man does not know how to appreciate favors, I suppose he doesn't have any face to stay in the Palace much longer."

Qi Yuankai said, "Most likely he slipped away; this person is sneaky, it's good if he did not steal anything before he left."

A martial art master said, "That would be very difficult to say."

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "The way this man surnamed Qi handling matters is very thorough; he made that man surnamed Lang lose face in a big way first, and thus he had no choice but had to sneak out quietly. When the people in the Palace discover a dead body and a missing object, naturally the suspicion will fall onto that man surnamed Lang. Very good, I must learn this clever trick; before doing anything, I must find a good scapegoat first."

Seeing it was getting late, the Chief of Imperial Bodyguards Dolong got up to take his leave, saying that he was on duty in

the Palace. Wei Xiaobao followed by also taking his leave. Prince Kang did not dare to detain them; chuckling, he sent them off the door. Wu Yingxiong, Songgotu, and the others also sent them off to the main gate. Wei Xiaobao had just climbed into a sedan chair when Yang Yizhi stepped forward and presented a bundle with both hands, saying, "Our Heir Apparent presents this little gift to Gui Gong-gong, hoping Gong-gong will not dislike this meager present."

"Thank you very much," Wei Xiaobao replied with a laugh, he received the gift with both hands, and then still laughing he said, "Yang *Dage*, I feel like meeting an old friend when we met for the first time. I consider you as a good friend, if I give you some money, I would be disrespectful to you. When I have free time some other day, I'll invite you for some drink."

Yang Yizhi was delighted; he said with a laugh, "Gong-gong has already given me seven hundred *taels*, isn't that enough?"

Wei Xiaobao guffawed and said, "That was somebody else who foot the bill, it doesn't count."

Not too far after the sedan chair left the alley, Wei Xiaobao was getting impatient; he ordered the porters to halt the sedan chair and raised the lantern on the outside of the chair, and then he unwrapped the bundle to look at the gift. It consisted of three brocade boxes, in one box was a pair of emerald chicken, a rooster and a hen, the craftsmanship was very exquisite. In the second case were two strings of pearls together, each string had a hundred pearls. Although the size of the pearls was not as big as the ones he ground and applied to Xiao Junzhu’s face, it was very rare to find two hundred perfectly round and flawless pearls at the same size. He was delighted, “I lied to Xiao Junzhu, telling her I was going to buy some pearls; Wu Yingxiong has just helped me cover up my lie.” Inside the third brocade box were gold banknotes, each sheet was ten *liang* of gold, altogether there were forty sheets, worth four hundred

liang of gold.

Wei Xiaobao mused, “Next time I see Wu Yingxiong, that little traitor, I would coldly and indifferently thank him, so that I would appear dissatisfied with his below average gift; he would definitely try to make up for it. This is the ingenious method Suo *Dage* taught me. If this little traitor pretends not to understand, *laozi* would simply look him in the eye, ‘Hey, *Xiao Wangye*, you gave me a pair of tiny green chicken, what’s so amusing about them? They don’t look like real chicken.’ The little traitor would ask me, ‘Gui Gong-gong, what do you mean they don’t look like real chicken?’ *Laozi* would simply say, ‘Where in the world can you find rooster and hen that small? Even sparrows are a lot bigger than those chickens. Besides, green parrot, green peacocks, I have seen a lot, but green chicken? I have never seen any. I wonder if you have green chicken in Yunnan.’ The little traitor could only laugh bitterly. *Laozi* would also say, ‘Even if there is green chicken, shouldn’t the rooster’s cockscomb be red? Anyhow, the hen cannot lay eggs, what kind of treasure is that?’ Ha ha, ha ha …!”

Returning to the Palace, Wei Xiaobao hurriedly went back to his own room. He unlatched the bolt, lighted the candle, opened the bed curtain, and said with a laugh, “Are you tired of waiting?” He saw Xiao Junzhu was still lying motionless on the bed; her eyes were opened wide, with several pieces of cake were still piled up on her mouth, unexpectedly she did not eat even a single piece. He took out the two strings of pearls and said with a laugh, “Look, I buy you these two strings of pearls. I am going to grind it and applied it onto your face. If you don’t become the most beautiful young woman under the heavens, my surname is not … is not Gui! Are you hungry? Why don’t you eat the cake? Let me help you up so you can eat.” Reaching out, he propped her and sat her up; suddenly his flank went numb, followed by a burst of pain on the pit of his stomach.

“Ah!” Wei Xiaobao cried out in alarm, his knees turned soft and he fell sitting down on the floor; his entire body was numb and he was unable to move at all.

Note: The word ‘lavatory’ from the title of this chapter ‘each one as lofty as gentlemen's lavatory’ means ‘mingle together’. From ‘The Record of the Grand Historian’ by Sima Qian – Cheerful and Staunch Legend: ‘The guests inside the lavatory’.

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[1] Lit. ‘old man’; 'I, your father' or simply 'I', used arrogantly or jocularly.

[2] Posthumous name of the first Han Emperor Liu Bang (256 or 247 – 195BC, reigned 202-195BC).

[3] ‘Alias’ – my dictionary gives this explanation: ‘courtesy or style name traditionally given to males age twenty in dynastic China’.

[4] Gu Yanwu (1613-1682), late Ming/early Qing Confucian philosopher, linguist and historian, played a founding role in phonology of early Chinese, author of ‘Record of Daily Study’. Huang Zongxi (1610-1695), scholar and writer of the Ming-Qing transition.

[5] Emperor Hong Wu, regnal name of first Ming emperor Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398), reigned 1386-1398). Temple name Ming *Taizu*.

[6] I seem to remember reading about rich families in ancient China who had guests staying in their homes for an extended period of times. Interestingly, Bing Translator gives this definition: protégés of the powerful who stay with their

benefactors like parasites.

[7] Tianqi Emperor, fifteenth Ming emperor Zhu Youxiao (1605-1627, reigned 1620-1627).

[8] The term *yamen* is practically used to describe any local government office in feudal China.

[9] 'Daren' (lit. big person), a term used by common people (or an officer of lower rank) to address government official (or his/her superior).

[10] Wei Zhongxian (1568-1627), infamous eunuch politician of late Ming. (See also 'White Hair Demoness', translated by Faerie Queene and yours truly.)

[11] Kunqu opera, influential musical theater originated in Kunshan, Jiangsu province during the Yuan [Mongol] dynasty.

[12] Xiaolian – successful second degree candidate in imperial exam.

[13] Lit. 'under'; lowly one, a humble way of referring to self.

[14] Zhuangyuan – top scorer in palace examination, 'hong' means red.

[15] 'zong' – chief, 'duo' – helm/rudder, 'zhu' – master or host, manager, someone who is in charge. Translator's note: My apology. I do not know how to translate it properly. I am aware that you guys do not like 'helmsman', so until we can agree on a good translation, I am going to stick with 'zongduozhu'.

[16] Bangyan - candidate who came second in the Hanlin examination (Zhuangyuan was the first place, Tanhua was the

third place).

[17] Poetic form consisting of four lines of five syllables, with rhymes on first, second and fourth line.

[18] The Pure Brightness Festival (Tomb Sweeping Day) (Confirmed by CFT).

[19] The character ‘tang’ [堂] here can also mean ‘hall’, hence ‘jing ye tang’ can also be translated as ‘Hall of Dedication’.

[20] From the poem 'Confession', translated by Bynner. Source: http://wengu.tartarie.com/wg/wengu.php?l=Tangshi&no=293,

[21] Idiom, meaning: get an official position.

[22] Lit. 'heaven and earth society'. I am aware that Minford translated this as 'Triads', however, I prefer the original form.

[23] Master Sir, lit. big master.

[24] Liang Hongyu was a female general and the wife of a mighty Song Dynasty general, Han Shizhong. Even today, it is said that, standing on Golden Mountain, one can still hear her beating the mighty war drum which stirred the hearts of her Song soldiers. (Wikipedia)

[25] Both the online text and the book have 江洋大盗 (jiang yang da dao - Lit. 'big robber of river and ocean'); however, my dad says that it should be 汪洋大盗 (wang yang da dao, meaning 'the biggest robber/high-caliber criminal'), since 'jiang yang da dao' does not mean anything.

[26] 'Eagle claw' usually refer to martial

artists/pugilists/fighters who work for imperial court. Additional info courtesy of Forgot Password: Besides some other meanings, 鹰爪 (eagle claws) can also be used to refer to lackeys, underlings, hired thugs and the likes. I think it is a combination of two words 鹰犬 (eagles and dogs) and 爪牙 (talons and fangs), both of which can be applied to lackeys.

[27] Lit. 'peaceful west'. Ping Xi Wang – king who pacifies the west.

[28] 'one who follows a villain', henchman, hired thug.

[29] Yigui, Ergui and Sangui mean ‘one’, 'two' and 'three turtles', respectively. Actually, the character 桂 'gui' of 'Wu Sangui' is different from 'gui' of 'turtle' [乌龟].

[30] Door bolts in those days are long pieces of wood placed across the door.

[31] 'Bai' means white or vain/empty. 'Chi Bai Shi' means 'to eat without paying'.

[32] Orig. 'wai sheng' - sister's son or wife's sibling's son.

[33] The word ‘mao’ (hairy) sounds like Mao Shiba’s surname. ‘Shiba’ means eighteen.

[34] A general of Shu, the sworn brother of Liu Bei in the 'Romance of the Three Kingdoms'.

[35] A military leader and Prime Minister of Shu Han during the Three Kingdoms period.

[36] Term to address a court eunuch.

[37] Lit. 'peaceful west'. Ping Xi Wang – king who pacifies the west.

[38] Refers to the Manchurian Eight Banners. We'll see more about it later.

[39] Steamed dumpling, with pork, shrimp, *etc.* filling (Incidentally, this is my favorite 'dimsum'. :-))

[40] 'Xuan' means black/mysterious. 'Xiao' – little, 'Zi' – child/small thing.

[41] Orig. 'Xiao Qin Na' - little grab and capture.

[42] Posthumous name of the first Han emperor Liu Bang (reigned 202-195 BC).

[43] An idiom, it means 'to dally with women' or 'to have affairs'. [Although I don't understand how he was going to do it, given the fact that he was only about 12, 13 years old.]

[44] Lit. Ol' First and Ol' Second, respectively, common terms to denote children ranks in the family.

[45] In Chinese, 'forty-two' consists of three characters: 'si' – four, 'shi' – ten, and 'er' – two.

[46] Namely, The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean, The Analects of Confucius, and The Analects of Mencius.

[47] Thirteen Confucian Classics: Book of Songs, Book of History, Rites of Zhou, Rites and Ceremonies, Classic of Rites, Book of Changes, Mr. Zuo's Annals, Mr. Gongyang's Annals, Mr. Gu Liang's Annals, The Analects, Erya, Classic of Filial Piety, and

Mencius.

[48] Posthumous name given to second emperor of a dynasty, in this case, Nurhachi’s son, Emperor Hung Taiji.

[49] Founding Emperor, in this case, Nurhachi.

[50] Orig. 'Shi Bao', same 'shi' character as in 'Shifu'.

[51] An idiom, meaning 'to steal something under cover of an emergency'.

[52] Orig. 'little slippery/smooth head'.

[53] Orig. 嗅鲞 (xiu xiang) – smell of wine-preserved pomfret, it sounds similar to 休想 (xiu xiang), *i.e.* don’t think of it, or give up any idea of.

[54] Orig. ‘chi’ –Chinese foot, approximately 1/3 of a meter (a little over 1 US foot).

[55] Eight trigrams.

[56] Or ‘death by a thousand cuts’ or ‘lingering death’.

[57] Songgotu, Ebilun, Bambursan were real historical characters, however, I could not find anything on Asiha (or Asahe).

[58] Orig. 圣上 – sheng shang, from the dictionary: courtier’s or minister’s form of address for the current Emperor.

[59] Zhang Guolao was one of the Eight Immortals who was usually depicted by riding a donkey backwards.

[60] FYI, Songgotu’s name in Chinese is ‘Suo E’tu’.

[61] Reminder: Xiaobao means ‘little jewel/treasure’.

[62] Orig. ‘golden orchid’, meaning profound friendship or sworn brotherhood.

[63] Ox-head and Horse-face are the two guardians of the underworld in Chinese mythology.

[64] About 1 ft 2 inches.

[65] In Chinese, the character for one and two are '一' and '二', respectively. The original says 'erase one 'one' character and change the amount ...'

[66] ‘Gui’ of Xiao Guizi means cassia/laurel, but ‘gui hua’ means osmanthus flower.

[67] Old mother, old lady.

[68] It's hard to capture the nuances of this: 去得好，去得妙，去得刮刮叫 'qu de hao, qu de miao, qu de gua gua jiao'.

[69] Lit. 'five platforms', in Shanxi province, one of Buddhists' Four Sacred Mountains.

[70] Lit. 'cool/refreshing'.

[71] Creator of the universe in Chinese mythology.

[72] Story behind ‘drinking vinegar’: During the Zheng Period of the Tang Dynasty (627-649), Wei Zheng was conferred by Emperor Tai Zong the titles of the Left Grand Councilor and

Duke of the State of Zheng for his dedication and valuable service in founding the Tang Dynasty. Indeed Wei Zheng was a man of great integrity and did not seek corrupt pleasure as many officials did. Wei refused to take any concubines or forsake his first wife. He also rejected the life of privilege, wealth and luxury, which many lesser men had greedily embraced after their rise in the social hierarchy.

Emperor Tai Zong decided to test Wei Zheng's fidelity. One day, after attending court, he invited Wei Zheng to stay behind and offered him some beautiful maidens to be his concubines. Wei immediately declined the offer. The emperor pressed his offer but Wei stuck to his position. During their conversation a third voice was heard, "Please Your Majesty, will you give me the concubines, since elder brother Wei does not want them?" pleaded Cheng Yao Jin, a boisterous general in the founding period. The Emperor was enraged by this insolence,and he curtly instructed Cheng to leave the court and to mind his own business.

Cheng was infuriated and rushed to the mansion of the Duke of Zheng to tell Madam Wei put on her court dress and went to see the Emperor with Cheng Yao Jin. She asked the Emperor to give her a reason as to why he should want to break up her happy and loving marriage. Madam Wei declared that if the emperor forced Duke of Zheng to adopt concubines, she would die. The Emperor responded, "Very well then, you shall have your way." He then asked his eunuch to bring in a bottle of poisonous wine which he had mixed himself for Madam Wei to drink. Cheng Yao Jin feared that the Emperor would really poison her. He tried to divert Madam Wei's fate and purposefully bumped into the eunuch carrying the bottle of poisoned wine which broke into pieces. Chen then replaced the broken bottle with a bottle of vinegar. The eunuch handed it to Madam Wei and she drank it in one gulp. She then waited to die but nothing happened, except for the strong acidic taste in her mouth.

Cheng Yao Jin then remarked that it was remarkable Madam Wei could drink so much vinegar. The Emperor was as confused as Madam Wei and asked the eunuch to explain what was going on. The Emperor smiled at the antics but remarked that it was a shame to have wasted the “poisonous’ hundred flower juice he had personally prepared. Actually the Emperor did not really intend to poison Madam Wei, he was merely amused to see how far her love would go.

Cheng Yao Jin’s credulousness and replacement of the hundred flower juice with vinegar has become a story with meaning for many jealous lovers. Madam Wei’s faithful love was so strong that she would even drink poison to defend it. But over the generations it has become a vulgar adage which means being jealous of a rival in love. (Courtesy of Ace High)

[73] Loose translation: 'Empress of solemn dedication of filial piety and majestic moral character, proclaimer of tender favor to the humankind'.

[74] Reference: Mini Facts and Figures of HSDS Chapter 12, by Huang Yushi (wuxiapedia.com), also the 'Yinwei' and 'Yinjiao' channels on the next paragraph.

[75] Orig. 受宠若惊 (shou chong ruo jing), literal translation: receiving favor as if frightened; he only remembered the words 'receive' and 'frightened'.

[76] Wangye – Master King, Xiao Ren – Little/lowly Person, Xiao Wang – little/lowly king.

[77] Orig. 'luanzi', can be used for both male and female: 'testicles/penis' or 'ovum'.

[78] Yama, King of the underworld.

[79] *Xiangzhu* means ‘fragrant master’. I think this is a high-ranking position in an organization, similar to *Tangzhu* – ‘hall master’.

[80] Ol’ Qi the third.

[81] The name ‘Guan’ means ‘mountain pass’.

[82] Play on words: the surname 'Jia' sounds like 'false/fake/artificial'.

[83] Yama, King of the underworld.

[84] Xiucai was a scholar who had passed the county level of imperial exam.

[85] Lit. ‘under’; the humble one, referring to self.

[86] Uncles, older than one's father and younger than one's father, respectively.

[87] Orig. Guoxing Ye, ‘master of Gouxing [country’s surname]’. From the dictionary: [Zheng Chenggong: Koxinga (1624-1662), south Chinese regional leader during early Qing, fled the mainland and conquered Taiwan from the Ducth.] Guoxing is a township in central Taiwan, however, it literally means ‘the country’s surname’.

[88] Fifty-first year of the 60-year cycle in Chinese calendar. Jiayin corresponds to the Wood Tiger year, the next Jiayin is 2034. I did a quick calculation, but the result did not make any sense to me: 2034 - 360 = 1674. According to wikipedia, Kangxi was born 1654, *i.e.* he was 20 years old in 1674. This story happened (supposedly) when Kangxi was 14, 15 years

old. Wikipedia also lists Oboi's death in the year 1670 (Kangxi was actually 16 years old). That means the date was in the future? If we take the previous sixty years, *i.e.* 1614, Koxinga was not even born yet.

[89] 'Men' here means family, house, (religious) sect, school (of thought), organization, *etc.*

[90] First Ming Emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398, reigned 1386-1398).

[91] Lit. 'king over a country/region'.

[92] FYI, 'hunan' and 'hubei' literally mean southern and northern lakes, respectively.

[93] Orig. 'helping tyrant Zhou in his opression'.

[94] Lit. 'great master'. I usually translate it as 'Reverend', but this time I want to keep it as 'Chinese' as possible.

[95] I want to point out that although I use the same word 'Abbot', in Shaolin's case it was 'Fang zhang', while in Wudang's case it was 'Guan Zhu' [guan – Taoist Monastery, zhu – master, the same 'zhu' as in 'xiangzhu' and 'zongduozhu']. Zhenwu is a major Taoist deity, 'Lord of profound heaven', or Black Heavenly Emperor.

[96] or 'plaster' [orig. Gaoyao], here in the US it is sold as 'hot/cold patch'.

[97] This passage is hard to translate; to get the not-so-subtle meaning of the original Chinese, simply substitute the word 'clear' with 'Qing (dynasty)' and the word 'clarity' with 'Ming (dynasty)'.

[98] Lit. ‘mutton’ and ‘big spine’, respectively. If you want to know more about acupoints, I remember wuxiapedia has some explanations, written by Huang Yushi.

[99] The names Hansong and Hanfeng literally mean 'cold pine' and 'cold maple', respectively.

[100] Old provincial territory during Ming and Qing dynasties, encompassing Beijing, Tianjin, most of Hebei, Henan, and part of Shandong.

[101] Tantui is a northern school of martial art boxing.

[102] Lei Yixiao, ‘lei’ – thunder, ‘yi xiao’ – one hiss or whistle.

[103] FYI: Orig. 圣手居士 [sheng shou ju shi], sheng shou can be translated as either ‘divine physician’ or ‘highly skilled practitioner’. In White Hair Demoness, ju shi was translated as ‘hermit’, but literal translation is ‘resident scholar’.

[104] Play of words: Hero - ying xiong, coward - gou xiong (lit. black bear).

[105] From Faerie Queene’s note in White Hair Demoness: Five Zang, Six Fu, where the 5 Zang organs consisted of the liver, heart, spleen, lungs and kidney and are Yin in nature. The gallbladder, small intestine, stomach, large intestine, Urinary Bladder and San-Jian (triple warmers – upper, middle and lower) comprises the 6 Fu organs that are Yang in nature.

[106] Lit. northern city, similar to ‘dongcheng’ [eastern district] at the beginning of this chapter.

[107] Percussion instrument used by Buddhists during rituals.

[108] Orig. 郡主 [Jun Zhu]. I want to distinguish between 公主 [Gong Zhu], Princess, a title denoting blood-relation to the Emperor, and 郡主 [Jun Zhu], Princess, indicating a non-royal relation, such as Duke or Count. Perhaps from now on I'll retain the title Junzhu. [Side note: Zhao Min of HSDS was also a Junzhu, not a Gongzhu]

[109] Orig. Xiao Niang Pi [小娘皮] – little mother's skin, perhaps a Yangzhou slang?

[110] Lit. 'divine hall', 'yang [positive] link], 'pillar of heaven', and 'jump the hoop', respectively.

[111] Xiao Niang Pi, see note 2 above.

[112] Orig. 'wooden intelligence and wooden feeling', the dictionary says that the character 'wood' can also means 'simple', which I feel that in this case it is more appropriate.

[113] Lit. 'armpit abyss' or 'armpit deep pool'.

[114] Lit. 'silk Chinese yo-yo', 'yang/positive white', 'just before sobbing'. [The names do not make any sense, I know; I am just translating the names literally.]

[115] Xuanwei is a county level city in Qujing, Yunnan; 'huo jiao' is fire foot. [Several paragraphs later, I found Jin Yong changed it to 'huo tui', (lit. fire leg/thigh), which is 'ham'. So I believe it was another typographical error on Jin Yong's side.]

[116] Gong – work/labor/craft, Yu – fish, Gan – dry. I am not sure what it is.

[117] Orig. 世子 (Shi Zi) - descendant son, crown prince;

obviously, I can't use 'crown prince', while another option 'successor' sounds rather strange. As much as I do not wish to use Minford's term, I have to admit that in this case his choice of word is the best; therefore, I will also use 'heir apparent'.

[118] Knocking on bamboo pole: an idiom meaning ‘extortion by taking advantage of somebody's weakness’. In those days one's wealth was usually carried on shoulder pole (although I am sure Wu Yingxiong would use horse-drawn carriage), Wei Xiaobao was 'knocking' on their treasure chest, so to speak.

[119] Shenzhao means ‘divine illumination/reflection’, Shangren (lit. upper/above person) is a term of respect to address a Buddhist monk.

[120] Poor or impoverished monk, a humble term used by Buddhist monks to refer to self.

[121] Out of curiosity, I searched the web for dice combinations; I found this one from http://www.gamesmuseum.uwaterloo.ca/Archives/Culin/Dice18 It is a bit different from the one depicted above. (Unfortunately it’s not in pinyin)

Chák t'ín kau, "throwing heaven and nine," is played with 2 dice. In this game the 21 throws that can be made with 2 dice receive different names, and are divided into two series, or suits, called man, "civil," and mò "military."

The 11 man throws in the order of their rank are:

- "Double six," called t'ín, "heaven."
- "Double one," called tí, "earth."
- "Double four," called yan, "man."
- "One, three" called wo, "harmony."

- "Double five," called múi "plum (flower)."
- "Double three," called ch'éung sám, "long threes."
- "Double two," caller pán táng, "bench."
- "Five, six," called fú t'au, "tiger's head."
- "Four, six," called hung t'au shap, "red head ten."
- "One, six," called kò kéuk ts'at, "long leg seven."
- "One, five," called hung ch'ui luk, "red mallet six."

The 10 mò throws in the order of their rank are:

- "Five, four," and "six, three," called kau, " nines."
- "Five, three," and "six, two," called pát, "eights."
- "Five, two," and "four, three," ts'at, "sevens."
- "Four, two," Called luk, "six."
- "Three, two," and "four, one," called 'ng, "fives."
- "One, two," called sám, "three," or sám kai, "three final."

[122] His name ‘bai sheng’ means ‘hundred victories’, ‘bai bai’ mean ‘hundred loses/defeats’.

[123] A mythological figure, supposed to drive away evil spirits.