金庸

33 作品集

鹿鼎記

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Edition.

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 the original 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.

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

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Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 11
At the end of spring, a shadow departs the small courtyard; in the night, light garment emitting faint fragrance.
(Translated by Foxs)

Wei Xiaobao picked a candlestick, he saw half of the woman's face was covered in blood, she was approximately seventeen, eighteen years of age, with an oval face, and looked very beautiful; he could not help but praise, "Turns out this stinky Xiao Niang Pi is a beautiful girl." Xiao Junzhu said, "Don't curse my

Shijie.”

Xiao Junzhu giggled, she lifted the quilt and got down from the bed. "My acupoints have been unsealed early on," she said with a laugh, "I have been waiting for a long time, why are you back only now?"

Wei Xiaobao was puzzled, "Who unsealed your acupoints?" he asked.

Xiao Junzhu replied, "Sealed acupoints will open after twelve, fourteen hours, no need for someone to open it. I'll help you to the bed, and then I'll go."

Wei Xiaobao was very anxious, "You can't, you can't!" he called out, "The scars on your face haven't healed yet. I must apply some medicine on you before you will be healed completely.

Xiao Junzhu giggled and said, "You are really bad, always deceive people. When did you carve my face? You made me worry for half a day."

"How do you know?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"I was able to get down the bed early on and looked at the mirror," Xiao Junzhu replied, "There is nothing on my face."

Wei Xiaobao looked at her face and noticed that it was bright, spotlessly white and soft; the bean paste, lotus seed paste and other things he applied on her face had been washed clean, he felt quite regretful, "I was in such a rush that I did not look at her face first, if I had seen that she had washed her face, whatever it was, I would never come close to her." he said, "It was because I applied my miracle cure on you, naturally you will be healed. Otherwise, why would I go to buy more pearls for you? I went to jewelry stores all around Beijing before I can find these two strings of pearls. I also bought a pair of exceptionally pretty toys for you."

"What kind of toys?" Xiao Junzhu asked hastily.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Unseal my acupoints first, then I'll get it for you."

"Alright!" Xiao Junzhu said. She was just stretching out her hand to unseal his acupoints when suddenly she saw he was rolling his eyes incessantly; her heart was moved. She laughed and said, "I almost fell into your trick. If I unseal your acupoints, you won't let me go."

"Can't be, can't be," Wei Xiaobao busily said, "A real man gave his words, that horse cannot chase it."

"You mean 'team of four horses cannot chase it'!" Xiao Junzhu said, "What do you mean 'that horse cannot chase it'?"

"That horse can run faster than a team of four horses," Wei Xiaobao replied, "If that horse cannot chase it, naturally a team of four horses cannot chase it even more."

Xiao Junzhu did not know which horse he was talking about, she was half believing half doubting; she said, "'That horse cannot chase it', this is the first time I've ever heard it."

"Now you have learned it," Wei Xiaobao said, "These toys are very amusing, one is male, the other female."

"Are they rabbits?" Xiao Junzhu asked.

Wei Xiaobao shook his head, "No, they are not. They are ten times more fun than rabbits."

"Are they goldfish?" Xiao Junzhu asked.

Wei Xiaobao shook his head vigorously, "What's so fun about goldfish?" he said, "These toys are a hundred times more fun than goldfish."

Xiao Junzhu guessed several more toys, all were incorrect. She said, "Take it out quickly! What is it?"

Wei Xiaobao wanted to lure her into unsealing his acupoints

first, he said, "As soon as you unseal my acupoints, I will show it to you."

Xiao Junzhu shook her head, "No, can't do. I am leaving now, *Gege* has not seen me, he must be very worried."

"Your acupoints have been opened for a long time," Wei Xiaobao said, "Why haven't you left? Why must you wait for me?"

Xiao Junzhu said, "You are kind enough to buy me some pearls, I must thank you first and say goodbye to you. If I simply leave without saying anything, won't I be too unfair to other people?"

Wei Xiaobao sniggered in his belly, "Turns out this little miss is a little idiot; Mu Palace people are blockheads, they are really not being surnamed incorrectly." He said, "That's right, I was so worried that being alone, you might be afraid in here, so I desperately ran along the streets, I wanted to buy the pearls as soon as possible, but looking from store to store, I couldn't find any that met my satisfaction, I was very anxious in my heart, I tumbled down several times."

"Aiyo!" Xiao Junzhu cried out softly, "Are you hurt?"

With distressed look on his face Wei Xiaobao said, "One time, I fell and hit a big stone on the pit of my stomach, the pain was unbearable."

"Are you feeling better now?" Xiao Junzhu asked.

Wei Xiaobao groaned several times, "My injury is not light, it is getting more and more painful. You ... you ... sealed my acupoints and unwilling to unseal it, my ... my ... my breath can't ... can't ... can't come up ... I ... I ..." His voice was getting lower and lower, suddenly his eyeballs rolled until only the white part was visible, as if he fainted, his breathing also stopped.

Xiao Junzhu reached out to feel his breathing, and indeed he was not breathing; she was shocked. "Ah!" she cried out; with a trembling voice she asked, "How can you die?"

Wei Xiaobao said intermittently, "You have ... have mistakenly ... mistakenly sealed my ... sealed my death ... death acupoint."

"It can't be, it can't be," Xiao Junzhu anxiously said, "*Shifu* taught me acupoint sealing technique, it can't be wrong. I clearly sealed your Ling Xu and Bu Liang, two acupoints, and also Tian Chi[1] acupoint."

Wei Xiaobao said, "You ... you were flustered, you sealed ... sealed the wrong acupoint. Aiyo! The *chi* and blood in my body are welling up, the channels of *chi* are reversed, my world is turning upside down, I suffer from fire ... fire ..."

"Fire deviation?" Xiao Junzhu said.

"Exactly," Wei Xiaobao said, "Aiyo! How can you be so muddleheaded? You haven't properly mastered the acupoint sealing technique, but randomly and blindly use it on my body? You did not seal any Ling Xu or Bu Liang acupoints, but you sealed my death acupoint. I am ninety percent sure it was the death acupoint!" He did not know any acupoint names, otherwise he would have mentioned the name of several fatal acupoints.

Xiao Junzhu was still very young, naturally she had not mastered her family's martial art skill. Acupoint sealing technique was indeed very difficult and complicated; there are several hundred major acupoints in human body, located only several *fen* away from each other. In a great rush, it was not uncommon to seal the wrong acupoint. However, she had received directions from good master, and was very familiar with the locations of these three acupoints. Although her strength was somewhat lacking, the acupoints she was sealing was not the slightest bit incorrect. It's just that it was a new

skill and this was the first time she used it, hence she did not have too much self-confidence. With Wei Xiaobao looking so distressed, and his acting was extremely believable, she thought she had indeed mistakenly sealed the fatal acupoint. "Could it be ... could it be that I have sealed your Shan Zhong [lit. mutton smell] acupoint?" she asked anxiously.

"Exactly," Wei Xiaobao said, "It's exactly the Shan Zhong acupoint. But don't be grieved, you ... you ... you did not do it intentionally. After I die, I won't blame you. When Yan ... Yanluo Wang asks, I won't say that you sealed my death acupoint ... I will say that I was not being careful, that my finger has sealed my own death acupoint that I died."

Hearing that he was willing to cover her up in front of the Yanluo Wang, Xiao Junzhu felt grateful, but also apologetic; she busily said, "Quick ... don't say anything, quickly unseal your acupoints, perhaps you can still be saved." Hastily she reached out to massage his chest and armpit.

Since the force with which she seal acupoint was not too strong, only by massaging a little while, Wei Xiaobao was already able to move. He groaned several times and said, "Ay, you have sealed my death acupoint, I won't live!"

Xiao Junzhu anxiously said, "Perhaps I can still save you. I was not being careful and sealed the wrong acupoint. Really ... really sorry."

"I know you are a good person," Wei Xiaobao said, "After I die, I will bless and protect you from the netherworld; from dawn to dusk, my ghost will always be your side."

Xiao Junzhu shrieked. "Your ghost will always be my side?" she asked.

"You shouldn't be afraid," Wei Xiaobao said, "My ghost will not harm you. It's just that there is a rule that whoever killed me, my ghost will always follow that person."

The more Xiao Junzhu thought about it, the more scared she was; "I did not kill you intentionally," she said.

Wei Xiaobao sighed; he said, "Little Miss, what is your name?"

Xiao Junzhu took a step back. “Why do you ask?” she said. Her face showed astonishment. “You are going to tell on me in the netherworld, aren’t you?” she asked, “I won’t tell you.”

Wei Xiaobao shook his head, “I won’t tell on you,” he said.

“Why did you ask, then?” Xiao Junzhu asked.

“So that when I am in netherworld I can bless and protect you,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “I have a lot of ghost friends in the netherworld; I will ask everybody to work hard together to bless and protect you, no matter where you go, several thousand several hundred of ghosts will follow you.”

Xiao Junzhu was so scared that she screamed and hastily said, “No, please don’t! Don’t follow me.”

“How about only me, one ghost, following you around?” Wei Xiaobao said.

Xiao Junzhu hesitated for a moment; she said, “If you … if you won’t scare me, then it’s alright.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Of course I am not going to scare you. When you are sitting down in the day time, my ghost will drive the fly away from you; when you are sleeping at night, my ghost will keep the mosquitoes away from you. When you are bored, my ghost will come to you in a dream, telling you stories that are very, very pleasant to hear.”

“Why do you treat me this good?” Xiao Junzhu asked; sighing gloomily, she said, “It would be better if you don’t die.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “There is something you promised me, but you haven’t done it yet. Ay, I won’t die with my eyes closed.”

“What is it? What did I promise to you?” Xiao Junzhu asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “You promised to call me ‘Good *Gege*’ three times. If before I die I can hear you call, then I will die with my eyes closed.”

Xiao Junzhu was born in the Palace, into a noble family who ruled Guizhou province for generations; her parents, older brother, as well as her elders, all doted on her very much. Although by the time she was born the country was already ruined and the people perished, as a minister’s family whose ancestors had done meritorious deeds, they had numerous slaves and servants who cherished this ‘golden-branch, jade leaves’ Junzhu in every possible way. In all her life, no one had ever lied to her or scared her. Growing up, she always heard that she must never tell even half a word of lies. Consequently, when she heard Wei Xiaobao’s nonsense, at first she accepted every word as the truth. But after a while she saw that the more he talked the more spirited he was, and when talking about her calling him ‘Good *Gege*’ three times his eyes were gleaming with mischief. She was only naïve and kind-hearted, but not at all an idiot. Realizing that Wei Xiaobao was teasing her, she took a step backward and said, “You deceived me, you are not going to die at all.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed heartily and said, “Even if I am not going to die for the time being, I will die in several days anyway.”

“You won’t die in several days,” Xiao Junzhu said.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Granted that I may not die in several days, but in the future I will die. If you don’t call me ‘Good *Gege*’ three times, my ghost will follow you day and night, I will continuously call you, ‘Good … Mei … Mei … Good … Mei … Mei …!’” He pinched his throat hard that his voice was dragged long and shrill, it sounded like a wretched ill wind, extremely scary. He also stuck out his tongue, pretended to be a ghost who died of hanging.

“Ah!” Xiao Junzhu screamed and turned around to run out of

the room. Wei Xiaobao ran after her. Seeing she was stretching out her hand to pull out the door bolt, he hurriedly grabbed and pulled her waist, saying, “You must not go out, there are too many evil spirits outside.”

“Let me go,” Xiao Junzhu anxiously said, “I want to go home.”

“You can’t go,” Wei Xiaobao said. Xiao Junzhu hacked down with the edge of her right palm toward his right wrist.

Wei Xiaobao flipped his palm and caught her forearm, Xiao Junzhu pulled back her elbow. Forming a fist with her left hand, she struck down the top of Wei Xiaobao’s head. Wei Xiaobao drew back and down to evade this punch blow, but he grabbed her calf. Xiao Junzhu launched the stance ‘Tiger Tail Scissors’, her left palm hacked diagonally down. Wei Xiaobao was unable to dodge; ‘smack!’ his shoulder was hit. He pulled with all his might, Xiao Junzhu was unable to stand, she was pulled down to the ground. Wei Xiaobao scrambled up to wrestle her, Xiao Junzhu legs flew out with ‘Mandarin Ducks Chain Kicks’ toward his face. Wei Xiaobao rolled away, but he caught and twisted her left arm.

Xiao Junzhu’s punching and kicking skill was taught by a prominent master, it was far more superior to the essence of skill Wei Xiaobao had learned. If the two of them were having a real martial art competition, Wei Xiaobao was not her match. However, the two of them were wrestling on the floor right now, one wanted to go, the other grabbing and twisting her, preventing her from leaving. In this kind of twisting, pouncing and wrestling skill, Wei Xiaobao had undergone an extensive training, he had had martial art competition with Kangxi for almost a year. Although the martial art skill Hai Laogong taught him was half true and half fake, plus he trained carelessly, in the end his body was still trained and he still knew several tricks of *qin na*.

In these several rounds, although the pit of Wei Xiaobao’s

stomach had received two blows, he managed to catch Xiao Junzhu’s right arm, which he bent and twisted backward. “Surrender?” he asked with a laugh.

“No!” Xiao Junzhu replied.

Wei Xiaobao raised his left knee and knelt on her arm, he asked again, "Surrender?"

Xiao Junzhu still said, "No!"

Wei Xiaobao increased the force on his hand to twist her arm behind her back harder. "Ah!" Xiao Junzhu screamed and began to cry.

During Wei Xiaobao's bouts with Kangxi, no matter how severe the pain those two boys experienced, they had never shown any weakness, much less crying. Whenever one of them was pinned down by the opponent and was unable to move, he would simply called out, "Surrender!" and then he would be considered the loser of that round, before they started wrestling again. Unexpectedly Xiao Junzhu's attitude was totally different from Kangxi, she cried as soon as she lost. "Pei!" Wei Xiaobao spat, "Useless little girl!" and he let her go.

Right this moment, suddenly they heard a 'crack!' on the window lattice. "Aiyo!" Wei Xiaobao cried out in a low voice, "A ghost!"

Xiao Junzhu was shocked; she reached out to hug him. They heard some noise on the window frame, the window was shoved open with creaking noise. This time, even Wei Xiaobao was frightened. "It's really a ghost!" he said in trembling voice. Xiao Junzhu threw herself forward and crawled underneath the quilt; her body was trembling all over.

The window was slowly pushed open, someone in gloomy voice called out, "Xiao Guizi, Xiao Guizi!"

At first Wei Xiaobao thought it was Hai Laogong's ghost

coming to demand his life, but the voice was a woman's voice. "It's a female ghost!" he said tremblingly, while successively took several steps backwards. His legs grew numb and he fell sitting down on the head of the bed.

Suddenly a gust of wind blew in, the candle in the room was extinguished, something blurring their eyes, there was one more person in the room. The female ghost creepily said, "Xiao Guizi, Xiao Guizi! Yan *Wangye* is calling you, Yan *Wangye* says you killed Hai Laogong!"

Wei Xiaobao was scared out of his wits; he wanted to say, "I did not kill Hai Laogong." But his mouth was wide open and his tongue tied; how could he speak out? He heard the female ghost said again in shrill voice, "Yan *Wangye* is going to seize you and take you, going up the mountain of blades, going down into a deep fryer. Xiao Guizi, today you can't run away!"

Hearing these sentences, Wei Xiaobao suddenly realized, "It's the Empress Dowager, not a female ghost!" But he did not feel less frightened, he thought, "If it was a female ghost, there is a possibility she can't catch me, but Empress Dowager will definitely kill me to close my mouth."

Ever since he knew the Empress Dowager's secret, at first he was constantly in fear that she would kill him to close his mouth, but all along there was nothing astir. After a long time, his fear gradually diminished, he thought that the Empress Dowager believed him, that he really did not hear what Hai Dafu was saying; or perhaps even if he did, she thought he would not dare to leak the secret, plus since he was promoted to be the head of the Catering Department, he must be very grateful to her, then all was well. How would he know that the reason she did not promptly deal with him was because when she fought Hai Laogong that day, she had suffered a very heavy internal injury? Moreover, she also saw that Hai Laogong's heavy kick unexpectedly did not kill Wei Xiaobao; she thought

this child must have profound internal energy cultivation. If she did not recover completely and have her strength restored, she did not dare to act without careful consideration. This business of killing people to close their mouths simply cannot be delegated to others; she must do it personally. Otherwise, if at the point of death the child spoke several sentences, wouldn't her important matter go bad?

This important matter carried too great of implications, not to mention that Wei Xiaobao was an insignificant little eunuch; even if it were imperial wives, imperial concubines, crown prince, generals or ministers, as soon as they find out about this secret, if there were a hundred people knew, she would kill a hundred, if there were a thousand people knew, she would kill a thousand.

She had been waiting for too long; although right now her strength had not fully recovered, she thought that if she delayed for a day, the danger of her secret leaking was also increased by a notch, until that night she could no longer wait and decided to act, and thus she went to Wei Xiaobao's room. As she pushed the window open, she heard Wei Xiaobao said, 'A ghost', and so she pretended to be a ghost. She did not know there was another person on the bed; slowly concentrating her strength, she raised her right hand, and step by step walked toward the bed.

Wei Xiaobao knew he could not resist, hence he crawled into the quilt. The Empress Dowager brought down her palm, 'slap!' she simultaneously struck Wei Xiaobao and Xiao Junzhu. Fortunately the quilt was very thick, so most of her strength was dissipated.

The Empress Dowager raised her palm again to deliver the second strike, this time she increased her power. Her palm had just touched the quilt when suddenly she felt a severe pain on the center of her palm, like an injury from a sharp object. She

cried out loudly and leaped backward.

Suddenly from outside the window she heard three, four people shouting and yelling, "Assassins! Assassins!" The Empress Dowager was stunned, "How did they know?" she thought. The fact that she came personally to kill a little eunuch must not be known to anybody, plus the pain on her palm was so severe that she did not have time to see whether Wei Xiaobao had died or not. Her feet kicking the ground, she flew out of the window. Yet before she landed, two people attacked her from behind. The Empress Dowager sent her palms backward in the move 'Looking Back Without Any Concern', both her left and right palms simultaneously hit the two people's chests. The two people fell straight to the ground.

She heard the 'Tang! Tang!' sound of the gong, in a short moment all around her the gongs were sounded. From a distance some people were calling out, "First and Second Guard Units protect His Majesty, Third Guard Unit protects Empress Dowager." Immediately afterwards, from the eastern end of the rockery someone called out, "Assassin in here!" Empress Dowager knew that these people were the Imperial Bodyguards; immediately she shrank back and hid behind some flowering shrubs. She felt the pain in the middle of her palm was getting worse, she saw indistinctly seven, eight people were fighting fiercely, their weapons collided unceasingly; she thought, "Turns out there really are assassins in the Palace. I wonder if they are Hai Laogong's friends, or Oboi's former subordinates?" She heard from the distance the unending voices of people giving orders; the light from torches and Kong Ming lanterns[2] appeared in the darkness, gathering together from all directions. The Empress Dowager realized that if she tarry slightly and did not leave right away, it would be difficult for her to escape undetected. She crouched down and suddenly leaped out from behind the flowering shrubs, and then bolted

toward the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful.

She was only rushing for several *zhang* when directly in front of her someone attacked; with the pair of steel awls in his hands he swiftly stabbed the Empress Dowager's face, while shouting, "Audacious rebel, unexpectedly dare to come to the Palace to create havoc."

The Empress Dowager slanted her body slightly, her right palm feigned a move, her left palm struck toward his shoulder. The man pulled his shoulder back to evade, then he spun around as the steel awl in his left hand rose up. The Empress Dowager dodged to the left and sent her right palm backhandedly. In an instant the two of them had exchanged several moves.

The man bawled, “Rebel thief, turns out you are a woman.”

The Empress Dowager saw that this Imperial Bodyguard’s martial art skill was not weak; although she could subdue him, she would need more than a dozen moves, by that time perhaps the rest of the Imperial Bodyguards would catch up. In a moment of desperation she called out, “I am the Empress Dowager.”

The Imperial Bodyguard was stunned; he held his hands and asked, “What?”

“Audacious servant,” the Empress Dowager said, “You dare to offend the Empress Dowager?”

The man hesitated slightly, the Empress Dowager sent out both palms, ‘Bang!’ she struck the pit of his stomach. The Imperial Bodyguard was killed instantly. The Empress Dowager gathered her *chi* and leaped, she ducked away into the flowering shrubs.

When Wei Xiaobao crawled into the quilt, his waist was slapped by the Empress Dowager, he was almost suffocated; in desperation he pulled the dagger in his boot and held it facing

up inside the quilt, raising the quilt somewhat higher. When the Empress Dowager sent the second palm strike toward the bulging quilt, due to the extremely sharp dagger and the powerful strike of the Empress Dowager's palm, the point of the dagger immediately penetrated the quilt and pierced the center of her palm all the way through the back of her hand.

After the Empress Dowager jumped out of the window, Wei Xiaobao raised the corner of the quilt and heard the commotion outside his window. The very first thought that came into his mind was, "The Empress Dowager has sent people to arrest me." He leaped out of the bed, lifted the quilt, and said, "Hurry, we must run away!"

Xiao Junzhu cried and said, "It hurts … it hurts so much!" What happened was the Empress Dowager's first strike hit Wei Xiaobao's waist and Xiao Junzhu's left leg. Xiao Junzhu bore most of the brunt that unexpectedly the calf bone of her left leg was broken.

"What happened?" Wei Xiaobao asked, while trying to pull her by the collar of her clothes. "Hurry up, hurry up!" he said, pulling her down the bed.

Xiao Junzhu stepped on the floor with her right foot first, but she felt the pain on her left leg was unbearable, her body leaned to one side, and she tumbled down on the floor. "My … my leg is broken," she said while crying.

In a moment of desperation Wei Xiaobao cursed, "*Xiao Niang Pi*, why do you have to break your leg not sooner or later …" In his heart he said, "Saving my own life is more important for *Laozi*; forget that you broke one leg, even if you broke four legs, eight legs into seventeen, eighteen pieces, *Laozi* won't care." Turning around, he rushed to the window and peeked out. He was hoping there wouldn't be anybody outside so that he could leap out.

But as he looked out, he saw the Empress Dowager struck backward with her palms, followed by two people flew up and fell heavily down on the ground. One person happened to land right in front of his window. In the dark night he saw faintly that this man was dressed in an Imperial Bodyguard uniform; he was extremely baffled, “Why would the Empress Dowager strike the Palace’s Imperial Bodyguard?” He saw the Empress Dowager dodged into a flowering bush; he also saw several *zhang* away six, seven men were engaged in a close combat, each one had a weapon in his hand, the battle was really intense. He heard people shouting from the distance, “Catch the assassins! Catch the assassins!”

Wei Xiaobao was pleasantly surprised, “Turns out there really are assassins in the Palace; they are not here to catch me.” Focusing his attention outside, he saw the Empress Dowager was fighting with another Imperial Bodyguard. The Imperial Bodyguard was wielding a pair of steel awls. Although they were fighting quite some distance away from his window, he could still see the flashing of the steel awls. After fighting for a while, the Empress Dowager killed the Imperial Bodyguard, and then she flew into the darkness and disappeared.

Wei Xiaobao turned his head to look at Xiao Junzhu; she was sitting on the floor, whimpering softly. Since now he knew he was not in any danger, his mood improved considerably. Walking toward her, he said in a low voice, “Does it hurt so much? There are people outside who want to get you. Don’t make any noise.”

Xiao Junzhu was so frightened that she did not dare to make any noise. Suddenly somebody outside the window shouted, “Black feet and dog’s teeth are formidable, go up the Diancang Mountain!”

“Huh?” Xiao Junzhu exclaimed, “Those are our men.”

“They are your friends?” Wei Xiaobao wondered, “How do you

know?”

“What they said was our Mu Palace’s code words,” Xiao Junzhu said, “Quick … quickly help me up, I want to look.”

“They are coming to the Imperial Palace to rescue you, aren’t they?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“I don’t know,” Xiao Junzhu replied, “Is this the Imperial Palace?”

Wei Xiaobao did not reply; he thought, “If they knew that this little girl is in here and broke into the Palace to rescue her, *Laozi*’s two fists cannot fight the enemy’s four hands.” He reached out and firmly covered her mouth, while with a low voice he threatened, “You must not make any noise, if they find out, your other leg will be broken, I won’t be able to bear it!”

They heard someone shouting outside, “Ah!” while another voice cheered, “Two assassins are killed!” and yet another voice called out, “The assassins are running away to the east, everybody, pursue them!” The voices gradually went far away.

Wei Xiaobao released his hand and said, “Your friends run away!”

“They did not run away!” Xiao Junzhu said, “They said ‘go up the Diancang Mountain’, that means they are retreating temporarily.”

“What is ‘black feet dog’?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“‘Black feet dogs’ are Tatars warriors,” Xiao Junzhu replied.

The voices in the distance were still faintly heard, people were transmitting orders incessantly, obviously the effort of capturing the assassins was still going on. Suddenly they heard someone was groaning twice below the window, it was a female voice. Wei Xiaobao said, “There’s an assassin that has not died yet, let me stab her twice!” The Imperial Bodyguards in the Palace were all male, so this voice definitely belonged to the assassin.

Xiao Junzhu said, “No … don’t kill her, perhaps she is from our Palace.” Propping herself on Wei Xiaobao’s shoulder, she stood up and with only her right leg she hopped to the window. She saw two people outside the window. “Southern sky northern land …” she said. Wei Xiaobao stretched out his hand to cover her mouth again. But the female voice outside the window replied, “Under the throne of bright peacock. You … are you Xiao Junzhu?”

Wei Xiaobao thought that since this woman had discovered Xiao Junzhu’s trail, the incoming disaster was not small; raising his dagger, he wanted to throw it down. Suddenly he felt his right wrist tightened as it was being grabbed by Xiao Junzhu, followed by a stabbing pain on his flank so that involuntarily his hand holding down her mouth came loose.

“Is it *Shijie* [older martial sister]?” Xiao Junzhu asked.

“It’s me,” the woman below the window replied, “What … what are you doing in here?”

“Your granny,” Wei Xiaobao cut her off, “What are you doing in here?”

“Don’t … don’t curse her,” Xiao Junzhu said, “She is my *Shijie*. *Shijie*, are you injured? You … please think of a way to save my *Shijie*. *Shijie* is very good to me.” She said those words to two different people.

The woman underneath the window groaned and said, “I don’t want to be saved by this kid. He doesn’t even have the ability to save me.”

Wei Xiaobao struggled hard to free himself, Xiao Junzhu then loosened her grip. Wei Xiaobao cursed, “Stinky woman! You said I don’t have the ability to save you? You, this little girl, are just a ninth-class martial artist. Humph, *Laozi* only needs to stretch my little finger, then I will be able to save twenty, thirty, or even seventy, eighty mothers like you.”

By this time the cry ‘catch the assassins, catch the assassins’ was resounding again from the distance. Xiao Junzhu was greatly anxious, she hurriedly said, “Please hurry, save my *Shijie*. I … I will call you three times, Good … Good … *Gege*, Good *Gege*, Good *Gege*!” Originally she was unwilling to utter these words, but now in order for him to save someone, she had called him three times in a row.

Wei Xiaobao was very happy; he said, “Good *Meizi*, what do you want your good *Gege* do?”

Xiao Junzhu’s entire face turned deep red; she said in low voice, “I am asking you to save my *Shijie*.”

The woman under the window was extremely obstinate; she said, “Don’t ask him, this kid is powerless; he won’t be able to save even himself.”

“Humph,” Wei Xiaobao snorted, “Looking at my good *Meizi*’s face, I am bent on saving you. Good *Meizi*, we have said the words, you must not deny; you want me to save your *Shijie*, later you can’t go back on your own words, you must call me ‘Good *Gege*’ forever.”

“I will call you whatever you want,” Xiao Junzhu said, “Good *Shushu*, Good *Bobo*, Good *Gonggong*[3]!”

“I only want to be your Good *Gege*,” Wei Xiaobao said, “If you called me *Gonggong*, I am afraid I am a little lacking.”

“Alright,” Xiao Junzhu said, “I will forever … forever call you ‘Good’ … ‘Good’ …”

“’Good’ what?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Xiao Junzhu said, “Good … *Gege*!” While saying that, she gently pushed his back.

Wei Xiaobao jumped out the window. He saw a woman dressed in black, her body curled into a ball, was lying on the

ground. He said, “The Palace’s Imperial Bodyguards are coming to arrest you, they are going to behead you and chop you into mincemeat and use you as the stuffing for the steamed buns.”

The woman said, “What’s so strange about that? Our people will avenge me.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “You, little girl, are so stubborn. The Imperial Bodyguards won’t kill you right away, they will strip you naked, everybody … everybody will take you as a wife.”

The woman angrily said, “Quickly use your blade to kill your Miss.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed, “Why would I want to kill you? I also want to strip you naked, and then take you as my wife.” Finished speaking, he bent over to pick her up. The woman was extremely anxious, she waved her palm to slap his ear, but she was heavily injured, her hand did not have the least bit of strength, when the palm reached his face, it only felt like a gentle brush.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “You haven’t become my wife, yet you tickle your husband first.” Carrying her body, he handed her over the window. Xiao Junzhu was greatly delighted, she stepped forward to receive the woman, and then slowly lay her down on the bed.

Wei Xiaobao was about to follow by leaping into the room when suddenly someone by his feet said in a low voice, “Gui … Gui Gonggong, this woman … this woman is a rebel thief … an assassin, you must not … must not save her.”

Wei Xiaobao was shocked, “Who … who are you?” he asked.

The man replied, “I … I am the Palace’s … Imperial … Bodyguard …”

Immediately Wei Xiaobao understood that he was the Imperial Bodyguard who was hit by the Empress Dowager just a

moment ago, unexpectedly he did not die; he lay on the ground, unable to move a single step, his speech was also discontinuous, obviously his injury was very heavy. Wei Xiaobao thought, “If I handed over this woman in black, it would be a meritorious service, but what about Xiao Junzhu? This matter would fall through and stand exposed, than the disaster would be even greater.” Raising his dagger, ‘stab!’ he thrust it into the man’s chest. The Imperial Bodyguard did not even grunt; he died instantly.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Forgive me for this, if just now you did not open your mouth, you would not have to die, but then Gui Gonggong’s head would not sit smooth and steady on my neck.” He thought further, “Perhaps there are more injured people nearby, I have no choice but kill them all to close their mouths.” Thereupon he looked around the surrounding flowering bushes and rock garden thoroughly; altogether he found five bodies on the ground: three Imperial Bodyguards and two assassins from the outside, they all had breathed their last breath. Wei Xiaobao picked an assassin’s corpse and placed it over the window sill, with head inside and legs outside, and then with his dagger he stabbed the corpse’s back several times.

Xiao Junzhu was startled, “He is our Palace’s man; he is dead, why do you kill him again?”

“Humph,” Wei Xiaobao snorted, “He is dead, I can’t kill him anymore. Try killing a dead man and show it to me! But if you want me to save your stinky *Shijie*, I have to do this.”

The woman, who was lying on the bed, said, “You are the stinky one!”

“You haven’t smelled me, how do you know I am stinky?” Wei Xiaobao replied.

“This entire room is reeking with stench,” the woman said.

“It was originally very fragrant,” Wei Xiaobao said, “It smells

as soon as you came in.”

Xiao Junzhu anxiously said, “The two of you do not even know each other, yet quarrel as soon as you meet. Quickly stop bickering. *Shijie*, how did you come here? Is it … is it to save me?”

“We did not know you are in here,” the woman replied, “Everybody did not see you, we went everywhere to look for you but could not find you …” Speaking to this part, she was already out of breath.

Wei Xiaobao said, “You don’t have strength to talk, you’d better talk a little less.”

“I want to talk, what are you going to do about it,” the woman said.

“If you have the ability, go ahead and talk,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Other people’s Xiao Junzhu is so gentle and refined, not at all like you who are rude and unreasonable.”

“No, no, you don’t know,” Xiao Junzhu busily said, “Nobody’s better than my *Shijie*. Don’t curse her, then she won’t be mad at you. *Shijie*, which part of you is injured? Is it heavy?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Her martial art skill is not good, she overestimated her own capabilities, she came to the Palace just to lose face, naturally her injury is heavy. I’ll say she won’t live pass six hours; perhaps before daylight she will return to heaven.”

“She can’t die,” Xiao Junzhu said, “Good … Good *Ge* … please think of something quickly, save my *Shijie*.”

The woman angrily said, “I would rather die, I don’t need his help. Xiao Junzhu, this kid is glib-tongued, why do you call him … call him like that?”

“Call me what?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

The woman did not fall into his trick, “Call you little monkey,” she said.

“I am a male monkey,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You are a female monkey.” Bickering and quarreling with women, he had had an extensive practice when he was in Lovely Spring Courtyard; he had experienced major conflicts and major battles, how could he lose against other people? When the woman heard him speaking vulgarity, she no longer paid him any attention, she simply breathed deeply.

Wei Xiaobao raised the candlestick on the table and said, “First we must find where her injury is.”

“Don’t look at me! Don’t look at me!” the woman shouted.

Wei Xiaobao shot back, “Don’t shout loudly! Do you want people to catch you and take you as wife?” Picking the nearby candlestick, he saw half of the woman’s face was covered in blood, she was approximately seventeen, eighteen years of age, she had an oval face, and looked very beautiful; he could not help but praise, “Turns out this stinky *Xiao Niang Pi* is a beautiful girl.”

Xiao Junzhu said, “Don’t curse my *Shijie*, she … she is indeed a beautiful girl.”

“Very well!” Wei Xiaobao said, “Now I want to take her as my wife even more.”

The woman was startled, she struggled, wanted to slap him, but she only managed to lift her body a little, then she cried, “Ah!” and fell down on the bed.

Naturally Wei Xiaobao had heard a lot about the matters of men and women in the brothel, but knowing and doing are not the same. He said ‘take her as wife’, but he was still young, and the thought of actually doing it had never crossed his heart; it’s just that he was a natural prankster. When he saw how the woman became very anxious as soon as he mentioned he was

going to take her as his wife, he could not help feeling very smug. He laughed and said, “Don’t be impatient, we have not performed the wedding ceremony yet, how can we be man and wife? You think this place is the Lovely Spring Courtyard? As soon as you talk about being man and wife you want to do it immediately. Aiyo! Your wound is bleeding, you are spoiling my bed!” He saw blood continuously seeped out her clothes; her injury was indeed not light.

Suddenly he heard footsteps, a group of people came hurrying, someone called out, “Gui Gonggong, Gui Gonggong, are you alright?” After the Imperial Bodyguards repelled the assassins, they sent people to protect the Emperor, Empress Dowager, and comparatively high-ranking imperial concubines, then they also protect department heads and eunuchs with authority. Wei Xiaobao was the Emperor’s favorite, so they sent a dozen or so Imperial Bodyguards to curry his favor.

Wei Xiaobao said in low voice to Xiao Junzhu, “Hide in the bed.” He pulled the quilt to cover the two women, pulled the mosquito net down, and called out, “Come here quick! There is an assassin here!”

The woman was shocked, but she was seriously injured, how could she struggle? Xiao Junzhu anxiously said, “Don’t shout, don’t call people to arrest my *Shijie*.”

“She does not want to be my wife,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Why should I be polite to her?”

While they were still talking, the dozen or so Imperial Bodyguards had already arrived in front of the window. “Aiyo!” one of them cried out, “There is an assassin here.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “That fellow wanted to climb into my room, *Laozi* finished him off with several stabs of my blade.”

The Imperial Bodyguards raised their torches and saw several

cuts on the dead man’s back; there were blood on his clothes, on the window sill, and on the ground. “Gui Gonggong must be startled.” Another man said, “What do you mean Gui Gonggong was startled? Gui Gonggong’s martial art skill is superb, he is able to kill the assassin in just one move. If there were more coming, he would simply kill them all the same.” The rest of the Imperial Bodyguards immediately followed by fawning him; they praised Wei Xiaobao greatly, saying that he had rendered a great merit tonight.

Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, “The merit is nothing, coping with one or two assassins did not need too much effort. Arresting the Manchu's Number One Warrior Oboi is a bit harder to do." The crowd of Imperial Bodyguards naturally seized this opportunity to flood him with flattery.

One of the Imperial Bodyguards said, "Shi *Laoliu* and Xiong *Lao'er* [Ol' Six and Ol' Second, respectively] died in the line of duty, those assassins were truly very fierce. If it were not Gui Gonggong, how would he deal with it?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "It's more important for you all to protect His Majesty, in here I am alright."

Another man said, "Dolong *Zongguan* is leading more than two hundred brothers to personally guard outside His Majesty's private chamber. The assassins have either escaped or killed, the Palace is quiet now."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Tomorrow I will ask His Majesty to grant some comfort and aid to the families of those Imperial Bodyguards who died in the line of duty. Everybody has been working hard, His Majesty will definitely grant generous reward." Everybody was delighted, they all bowed and expressed their gratitude. Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "As long as I don't have to spend my own money, why not become the mediator between them and the Emperor?" He said, "I do not remember very clearly everybody's surname and given

name; would you all report to me? If His Majesty asks who has exerted himself using extreme force of will, and has rendered great service tonight, *Xiongdi* will mention your names."

The Imperial Bodyguards were even more delighted, they hurriedly reported their name and surname. Wei Xiaobao had an extremely good memory, he was able to repeat the full names of those dozen or so Imperial Bodyguards without any mistake. He said, "You all should patrol everywhere, perhaps there are assassins still hiding in some dark and remote places. If you catch one alive, if it's a man, beat him severely, if it's a woman, strip her naked and take her as wife." The Imperial Bodyguards laughed heartily and repeatedly said, "Yes, yes!"

"Would you take away the corpse?" Wei Xiaobao asked. The Imperial Bodyguards compiled; they snatched the corpse and left after paying their respect once more.

Wei Xiaobao closed the window, turned around and lifted up the quilt. Xiao Junzhu laughed and said, "You are so bad, you scared us in a big way ... Aiyo ...!" She saw blood all over the bedding, her martial sister's countenance was deathly pale, her breathing was very weak.

"Where is her injury?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "Quickly stop her bleeding."

The woman said, "You ... go away, Xiao Junzhu, my ... injury is on the pit of my stomach."

Seeing the blood flowing from her wound was indeed a lot, Wei Xiaobao was afraid she might die from her heavy injury; he did not dare to tease her. Turning his head away, he said, "What's so good about bleeding wound anyway? Do you think it's a peep show or something fun to watch? Xiao Junzhu, do you have the medicine?"

"I don't," Xiao Junzhu replied.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Stinky mother, do you have any medicine

with you?"

"I don't!" the woman snapped, "You ... you are the stinky mother."

He heard light ripping noise, Xiao Junzhu was undoing the woman's clothes. "Aiyo!" suddenly she cried out in fear, "What ... what should I do?" Wei Xiaobao turned his head around, he saw a cut about two *cun* long below the woman's right breast, from which the blood was flowing continuously. Xiao Junzhu was at a loss of what to do; she cried and said, "You ... you ... quickly help my *Shijie* ..."

The woman was frightened and ashamed; with a trembling voice she said, "Don't ... don't let him see."

"Pei," Wei Xiaobao spat, "You think I've never seen one?" Seeing her blood was flowing endlessly, he was unable to restrain being panicked. He looked around the room, trying to find some cotton cloth to stop the blood stream from her wound. He spotted the medicine bowl and saw that he still had more than half bowl of his concoction of 'mashed lotus seed, bean paste, honey, candy and pearls'. "My miracle medicine can also stop bleeding," he said happily. Fetching a handful, he applied it on her wound.

This mixture of honey paste was very viscous, as soon as it was applied to the wound, the blood flow stopped. Wei Xiaobao spread the entire bowl of honey paste onto the wound, his fingers were also covered in honey paste. Seeing her nipples shivered, this little urchin restrained his mischievous thought with great difficulty; casually he smeared the paste on her breast.

The woman was ashamed and enraged at the same time, she called out, "Xiao ... Xiao Junzhu, quickly ... quickly kill him for me."

Xiao Junzhu explained, "*Shijie*, he is treating your wound!"

The woman was so furious she almost fainted. Unfortunately she could not move.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Quickly seal her acupoints, don't let her speak or move randomly; otherwise she might bleed again and her life will be in danger."

"Yes!" Xiao Junzhu complied; she sealed several acupoints on the woman's lower abdomen, flanks, and legs. "*Shijie*," she said, "Don't move randomly!" By now the pain on her own broken leg was almost unbearable; tears started to gush out of her eyes.

Wei Xiaobao said, "You should also lie down and not moving." He remembered his childhood in Yangzhou, when he had a fight with the little hoodlums and someone broke an arm or leg, the doctor would use splint to set the bone, and applied herbal medicine on it. Immediately he drew his dagger and cut two legs of a bench and clamped them on either side of her broken leg, and used a piece or cord to firmly tie them together. "Where can I find the medicine for her injury?" he mused.

After pondering for a while, he had an idea; to Xiao Junzhu he said, "The two of you must lie down on the bed, do not make any noise whatsoever." Releasing the mosquito net, he blew out the candle and pulled the latch to go out.

Xiao Junzhu was startled. "You ... where are you going?" she asked.

"To find medicine for your leg," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"Please hurry and come back soon," Xiao Junzhu said.

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied. Hearing the tone of Xiao Junzhu's voice, which unexpectedly she regarded him as someone she could depend on, Wei Xiaobao could not help but feeling very proud of himself. He had already turned around to close the door when he thought something was not right; he pushed the door and went in again, bolted it from the inside, and then he

jumped out the window and closed it behind him. In this way, other than Empress Dowager and the Emperor, no one in the Palace would dare to enter his room without permission.

He only walked a dozen of steps when he felt a dull pain on the edge of his lower back; he thought, "That Old Whore Empress Dowager dealt me a vicious blow. If I continue living in the Palace, sooner or later *laozi*'s old life will be difficult to protect; I'd better slip away as soon as possible."

He walked toward the torch light, which turned out to be several Imperial Bodyguards on patrol duty. As soon as they saw him, they rushed forward to greet him. Wei Xiaobao asked, "How many Imperial Bodyguard brothers in the Palace are injured?'

"Reporting to Gonggong," a man replied, "There are seven, eight men heavily injured, about fourteen, fifteen men lightly wounded."

"Where do they have their injury treated?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "Take me there to look."

The Imperial Bodyguards all said, "Gonggong is concerned over Imperial Bodyguards brothers, not a single one among us does not feel grateful." And thus two of the Imperial Bodyguards led the way, taking Wei Xiaobao to the building where the Imperial Bodyguards stay when they were not on patrol duty.

Twenty something Imperial Bodyguards lay down in the hall, four imperial physicians were busy attending to their injuries.

Wei Xiaobao stepped forward to express his sympathy, continuously praised everybody, saying that in order to protect His Majesty, they all dashed on bravely with no thought of personal safety, valiantly fought and kill the enemy. He also inquire the injured names one by one. Immediately the Imperial Bodyguards' spirit was aroused, as if their wounds did

not feel too painful anymore. Wei Xiaobao asked, "To which group do those rebel thieves belong to? Are they that servant Oboi's follower?"

An Imperial Bodyguard replied, "They seem to be Han people. But I don't know if we manage to seize a living witness?"

Wei Xiaobao inquired the details of the fighting between the Imperial Bodyguards and the assassins, while his eyes carefully watched the imperial physicians applying the medicine. Among the wounded Imperial Bodyguards, some received external cuts from sabers and spears, some received internal injury from fists and palms, some had their bones dislocated or broken. Wei Xiaobao said, "I'd better have some of those medicines by my side; if the Imperial Bodyguard brothers in the Palace are wounded while there's not enough time to summon the imperial physicians, I can give everybody good treatment first. Humph, those assassins are extremely vicious and wicked with enormous guts; since we cannot catch everybody in one net today, it's difficult to say that they won't come back."

Several Imperial Bodyguards said, "Gui Gonggong shows great empathy to Imperial Bodyguard brothers, indeed it is a thorough thought."

Wei Xiaobao said, "A moment ago I was besieged by three assassins, I killed one, the other two fellows ran away. But my waist was also severely hit by the assassin's palm, at this time it is still sore." While in his heart he said, "The Old Whore came to assassinate *laozi*, isn't she an assassin? This time *laozi* did not lie."

As soon as the four imperial physicians heard this, they left the Imperial Bodyguards immediately to attend to him. They untied his gown to examine him, and saw a large purplish black bruise on his lower back; busily they prepared the medicine for him, to be applied externally and taken orally.

Wei Xiaobao asked the imperial physicians to wrap each kind of medicine into a large package, which he then tucked into his bosom, while also asking for directions on the usage of the medicine. He also took two pieces of splint to be applied to the injury. And then again he praised and expressed sympathy to everybody before leaving.

His experience was limited, his words were a mess, and extremely inappropriate; during praising and expressing his sympathy, he used a lot of marketplace obscenities. Although the Imperial Bodyguards mostly came from imperial clan and noble families, but most of them were uncouth military people, who did not care much about 'his granny' or 'eighteen-generation ancestor'. Since they were injured by the assassins, they came to the realization that their skill was still inferior to the intruders. When they saw that His Majesty's favorite eunuch was also injured in the fight against the assassins, they were even more depressed. But then suddenly they received praises from Gui Gonggong, which was equal to receiving His Majesty's imperial decree commending their effort. Even if he rained curses on them, they would have accepted it gladly, much less praises scattered with random words? Their hearts were in full bloom, while wishing that the wound in their bodies was several *cun* longer.

Returning to his own room, Wei Xiaobao inclined his head and listened attentively outside the window first; after making sure that the room was quiet, he said in a low voice, "Xiao Junzhu, it's me, I'm back." He was afraid that if he rashly climbed over the window, the woman would chop him with a saber or stab him with a sword, then he may have to use the several packages of medicine in his pocket first.

Xiao Junzhu happily said, "Um, I have been waiting for you for a long time." Wei Xiaobao crawled into the room, closed the window, lighted the candle, and raised the mosquito net. He

saw the two maidens were lying side by side on the bed. When the woman's gaze met with his, she closed her eyes immediately. But Xiao Junzhu was looking at him with her bright and clear eyes, her gaze revealed gratitude.

"Xiao Junzhu," Wei Xiaobao said, "Let me apply to medicine on you."

"No," Xiao Junzhu replied, "Treat my *Shijie* first. Please give the medicine to me, I will apply it on her."

"What do you mean 'you' and 'I'?" Wei Xiaobao said, "That's not how we call each other."

Xiao Junzhu laughed vaguely, "What's your real name?" she asked, "I heard they call you Gui Gonggong."

"They call me Gui Gonggong, but what should you call me?" Wei Xiaobao said.

Xiao Junzhu closed her eyes slightly and said in a low voice, "In my heart ... in my heart I call you Good ... Good *Gege*, but if I keep calling you that with my mouth, this can't be ... can't be ... good."

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "Let's make a rule; when there are people around, I call you Xiao Junzhu, you call me Gui *Dage*. When nobody's around, I call you 'Good *Meizi*', you call me 'Good *Gege*'."

Before Xiao Junzhu replied, the woman opened her eyes and said, "Xiao Junzhu, that's so sickeningly disgusting, he is taking advantage of you, don't listen to him."

"Humph," Wei Xiaobao snorted, "Nobody asked you to call me, why do you have to meddle into other people's business? You want to call me Good *Gege*, I don't want to hear it."

"What do you want her to call you, then?" Xiao Junzhu asked.

"I only want her to call me 'Good Husband', 'Dear Husband',"

Wei Xiaobao said.

The woman blushed, a look of disdain appeared on her face; she said, "You want to be someone's husband? You need to be reincarnated."

"Alright, alright," Xiao Junzhu said, "You two are not nemesis from the previous incarnation, why do you bicker as soon as you meet? Gui *Dage*, please give me the medicine."

"I'll apply the medicine on you first," Wei Xiaobao said. Lifting up the quilt, he rolled Xiao Junzhu's pants up and disassembled the bench legs he used as splint earlier, and then he spread the medicine on the broken calf bone before tying it firmly with the new splint. Xiao Junzhu expressed her gratitude repeatedly, she sounded very sincere.

"What is my wife's name?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Xiao Junzhu was startled. "Your wife?" she asked. Seeing Wei Xiaobao pouted toward the woman, she smiled and said, "You love to crack jokes; my *Shijie* is surnamed Fang, her given name ..."

"Don't tell him!" the woman anxiously said.

Hearing that her surname was Fang, Wei Xiaobao immediately recalled the Mu Palace's Four Great Generals, Liu Bai Fang Su; thereupon he said, "Her surname is Fang, of course I know. That 'Divine Physician Hermit' Su Gang and the 'Twin Tree of the Bai Clan' Bai Hansong and Bai Hanfeng are all my relatives."

Hearing him mentioning the names of Su Gang and the Bai Brothers, both Xiao Junzhu and the woman was greatly amazed. "How ... how are they related to you?" Xiao Junzhu asked.

"Liu Bai Fang Su, four great generals," Wei Xiaobao said, "Naturally we are related."

Xiao Junzhu was even more surprised, "It's really hard to believe," she said.

"Xiao Junzhu," the woman said, "Don't believe his nonsense. This boy is very bad, he is not my relative. Having a relative like him will only bring bad luck."

Wei Xiaobao laughed heartily; he gave the medicine to Xiao Junzhu, and then leaned close to her ears and whispered, "Good *Meizi*, whisper her name to me."

However, the two young girls were lying next to each other, although Wei Xiaobao was whispering, the woman heard it clearly. "Don't tell him," she said anxiously.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "It's alright if you don't want to tell me, then I must kiss your mouth. I will smell your fragrance on this side of your face first, then smell your fragrance on that side, and then I'll kiss your mouth. Tell me, you prefer to be kissed, or to tell me your name? My guess is you will definitely choose to be kissed." Under the candle light the woman look very beautiful, her clothing was thin, his nose smell a faint scent of the woman [alright, I know it is not original, but I think this is the best translation of 女儿体香] . His heart was very happy; he said, "You are indeed very fragrant, I can enjoy smelling you very much."

The woman was unable to move, she was very angry to be sniffed by this mischievous kid's nostrils; fortunately he was a young boy, and listening to the Imperial Bodyguards a moment ago, she knew that he was a court eunuch, so he must be only fooling around by saying those naughty things, he would not possibly molest her for real, so there was no real reason for her to be frightened. However, seeing him pursing his lips to really kiss her, she busily said, "Alright, alright, tell my name to this little demon!"

Xiao Junzhu laughed, and then said, "My *Shijie* is surnamed

Fang, her given name is a single character, 'Yi' [harmony/joy], the 'yi' (怡) character with 'xin' (心) radical on the left and 'tai' (台) on the right."

Wei Xiaobao simply did not know how to write the character ‘yi’, he just nodded his head and said, “Um, this name is not so bad, but cannot be considered very good either. Xiao Junzhu, what is your name?”

“I am called Mu Jianping [or Mu Jianbing],” Xiao Junzhu replied, “Ping from ‘ping feng’ (standing screen) and not from ‘fu ping’ (duckweed).”

Wei Xiaobao did not know the difference between those two ‘ping’ characters; he said, “This name is comparatively better, but still not a first-class name.”

“Your name must be first class,” Fang Yi said, “I wonder how good is your respected surname and great given name?”

Wei Xiaobao was startled, he mused, “I can’t tell them my real name, while there is nothing special about the name Xiao Guizi.” Thereupon he said, “My surname is Wu [I/my (old)], since I am an eunuch in the Palace, everybody call me Wu Laogong[4].”

Fang Yi sneered and said, “Wu Laogong, Wu Laogong, this name is actually very …” Speaking to this point, she suddenly realized that she had fallen into his trick. “Pei!” she spat, “Talk nonsense!”

Xiao Junzhu Mu Jianping said, “You lie again, I heard they called you Gui Gonggong, you are not surnamed Wu.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Men call me Gui Gonggong, women call me Wu Laogong.”

Fang Yi said, “I know your real name.”

Wei Xiaobao was slightly startled. “How do you know?” he

asked.

"I know your surname is Hu (胡)," Fang Yi said, "And your given name is Shuo (说) character written eight different ways (八道)[5]."

Wei Xiaobao burst out in laughter; hearing Fang Yi, his breathing was back to normal. He said, "Good *Meizi*, apply the medicine on her, don't let her die of pain. I, Wu Laogong, only have one wife, if this wife died, the second wife cannot live up to the first."

Mu Jianping said, "*Shijie* said you talk rubbish (see footnote 5), sure enough, she is right." Releasing the mosquito net, she raised the quilt to apply medicine on Fang Yi. "Gui *Dage*," she asked, "What should I do with the blood-stopping medicine you applied earlier?"

"Has the blood stopped flowing?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"It has," Mu Jianping replied. Actually, honey is very effective to stop bleeding, it has high viscosity, and will adhere well to the wound, hence unexpectedly her bleeding stopped. As for the lotus seed paste, bean paste and the other ingredients, although they were not medicine, but when applied to the wound, they could also stop the bleeding.

Wei Xiaobao was delighted; he said, "The effectiveness of my miracle medicine surpasses Bodhisattva's magic potion, do you believe it now? With those many pearls in it, when applied to her chest, after the wound is healed, her breast will be exceedingly good-looking, will have the 'bashful flower obstructing the moon' appearance. Too bad only my son will be able to see it."

"Pfft," Mu Jianping stifled her laugh. "Your talk is really amusing," she said, "Why is it only your son can …"

Wei Xiaobao said, "When she nurses my son, naturally my son

will be able to see.”

“Pei!” Fang Yi spat. Mu Jianping just stared with her big round eyes; she did not understand why her *Shijie* would nurse his son.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Gently wipe the blood stopping miracle medicine clean, then apply the cut wound medicine.”

“Yes,” Mu Jianping complied.

Right this moment, suddenly they heard someone outside the door calling out with a loud and clear voice, “Gui Gonggong, are you asleep?”

“I am,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Who is it? Whatever it is, let’s talk about it tomorrow!”

The man outside said, “Subordinate Officer Rui Dong.”

Wei Xiaobao was shocked, “Ah!” he exclaimed, “It’s Deputy Chief Rui, I wonder … I wonder what’s the matter?”

Rui Dong was the Deputy Chief of the Imperial Bodyguards. When he was chatting with the Imperial Bodyguards, he learned that everybody admired this Deputy Chief Rui’s profound martial art skill, which was second only to Dolong, the Chief of the Imperial Bodyguards; he was an extraordinary character among the Imperial Bodyguards. For the last few years he was frequently outside the Palace on official business, so Wei Xiaobao had never seen him.

Rui Dong said, “Subordinate Officer has an urgent business I need to discuss with Gui Gonggong. My apology for disturbing Gui Gonggong’s peaceful slumber.”

Wei Xiaobao mused, “What is he up to, coming here in the middle of the night? I’m sure he knew I am concealing an assassin in my room, so he came to search; what should I do? If I don’t open the door, he may break it down. These two young girls are injured, it’s too late to run away now. I will have

to act according to the circumstance, I'll trick him to go away."

Rui Dong continued, "This matter is of great responsibility, otherwise I would not dare to disturb Gonggong's dream."

"Alright, I'll open the door," Wei Xiaobao said. Turning toward the bed, he said in a low voice, "You must not make any noise." He walked to the outer room, closed the door behind him, and braced himself to open the front door. He saw a tall and powerfully built man standing outside the door, the top of his own head was still shorter than the back of the man's neck.

Rui Dong cupped his fist and said, "Gonggong, please forgive my disturbance."

"You are too kind! You are too kind!" Wei Xiaobao replied. He looked up to examine Rui Dong's countenance, but saw neither smiling expression nor angry look, so he really could not read his intention. "What is the urgent matter, Deputy Chief Rui?" he asked; but he did not invite Rui Dong in.

"Just now I received the Empress Dowager's imperial order," Rui Dong replied, "She said that assassins were breaking into the Palace tonight, committing treason and heresy. She ordered me to inquire clearly from Gui Gonggong."

As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard 'Empress Dowager's imperial order', four words, he knew the turn of events was not too encouraging. "That's right!" he said, "I was just about to inquire clearly from you. A moment ago I paid my respect to His Majesty, His Majesty said, 'This servant Rui Dong is very brazen, as soon as he returned to the Palace, humph, humph …'"

Rui Dong was greatly shocked. "What else did His Majesty say?" he asked.

Actually, Wei Xiaobao was talking nonsense to him to stall for time, while he thought about a way to escape. Seeing those few words had enticed him to take the bait, he said, "His Majesty instructed me to conduct investigation among the Imperial

Bodyguards as soon as it is daybreak. He wanted to know who has prompted this servant Rui Dong to lure the assassins to enter the Palace? What is the plot behind it? Who else is involved in this conspiracy?”

Rui Dong was even more shocked; with a trembling voice he said, “His … His Majesty said … said that I lured the assassins to enter the Palace? Which crafty villain has told His Majesty that nonsense? This … isn’t this an enormous injustice?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “His Majesty instructed me to do the investigation quietly, he said, ‘If that servant Rui Dong heard the rumor, he is bound to come and kill you; you must be very careful.’ I said, ‘His Majesty, please be rest assured, even if that servant Rui Dong has courage as big as the sky, he will not dare to commit murder inside the Palace.’ His Majesty said, ‘Humph, that is not necessarily true. If this servant unexpectedly dared to lure the assassins into the Palace to harm me, what other business he did not dare to do?’”

Rui Dong anxiously said, “You … you talk nonsense! I did not lure the assassins to enter the Palace, His Majesty … His Majesty will not recklessly accuse a good man. Tonight I have personally killed three assassins; a lot of Imperial Bodyguards brothers witnessed it. His Majesty can summon them to be questioned.” While speaking, the blue veins on his forehead suddenly appeared, his hands were clenched into fists.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “I must scare him out of his wits first, so that he will be at a loss of what to do, then come daybreak, *Laozi* will flee from the Palace. But what should I do with that Xiao Junzhu and Fang Yi? Humph, like a clay Bodhisattva fording a river, *laozi* can’t guarantee my own safety; if I can escape alive, then we’ll talk. I don’t care if she is Xiao Junzhu or Lao Junzhu, Fang Yi or Yuan Yi[6]. *Laozi* won’t become fake eunuch anymore, won't become the *Xiangzhu* of the Green

Wood Hall. I am taking that four hundred fifty thousand *taels* back to Yangzhou, to open Lovely Summer Courtyard, Lovely Autumn Courtyard and Lovely Winter Courtyard." He said, "So it wasn't you who lured the assassins into the Palace?"

"Of course not," Rui Dong said, "The Empress Dowager said that it was you who led them into the Palace. Empress Dowager ordered me not to listen to your graceful words, flowery speech, to execute you with a palm strike."

Wei Xiaobao said, "I am afraid the two of us have been framed by some crafty villains. Deputy Chief Rui, don't you worry, I am going to explain everything to His Majesty. As long as you really did not lure the assassin, although His Majesty is young, he is very wise, plus he trusts me completely, so this matter can be brought to light."

"Alright," Rui Dong said, "Thank you very much! Now come with me to see the Empress Dowager."

Wei Xiaobao said, "In the dead of the night, why would I see the Empress Dowager? It will be better to see His Majesty as soon as possible. I am afraid people are coming to arrest you on imperial orders by now. Deputy Chief Rui, let me tell you this: when the Imperial Bodyguards come to arrest you, you must not resist at all; if you do, it won't be easy to wash away the criminal charge against you."

The muscle on Rui Dong's face trembled continuously; he angrily said, "Empress Dowager said that you like talking nonsense the most, and she was right. I did not commit any crime, why would I want to resist arrest? Come with me to see the Empress Dowager!"

Wei Xiaobao leaned over and said in a low voice, "Look, those who want to arrest you are coming!" Rui Dong's countenance changed; he turned his head around to look. Wei Xiaobao turned around and bolted into the room.

When Rui Dong saw there was nobody behind him, he knew he was being swindled. Quickly he ran after him into the room; he leaped and stretched out his hand to grab Wei Xiaobao's back.

Actually, Wei Xiaobao's threat had frightened Rui Dong very much. If Wei Xiaobao insisted on seeing the Emperor, most likely Rui Dong would not dare to stop him with force. However, Wei Xiaobao had hidden two women in his room, one of them was definitely an assassin who entered the Palace to create trouble. Since the plot had already fallen through and stood exposed, plus the Empress Dowager had personally come to take his life, how could he dare to explain everything to the Emperor? As soon as Rui Dong fell into his trick by turning his head, Wei Xiaobao dashed into the room, hoping that he could escape via the window. He was thinking that the imperial garden was full of fake rocks and flowering shrubs, hiding in the dark of the night, perhaps he would not be too easy to be found. Unexpectedly Rui Dong was very quick; Wei Xiaobao had just reached the door, Rui Dong had caught up with him.

As soon as Wei Xiaobao was inside the room, he jumped toward the window sill, and was about to jump out, Rui Dong sent out a palm strike toward Wei Xiaobao's back with a strong gust of wind. Wei Xiaobao’s legs buckled and turned soft, and he fell down. Rui Dong reached out with his left hand to grab Wei Xiaobao's waist. Wei Xiaobao unleashed the full potential of *qinna* technique he knew, parrying Rui Dong’s hand with both hands; but he was small, and his strength was feeble, his body swayed and ‘splash!’ he fell into a large water tub. The water tub was originally used by Hai Laogong to treat his injury. After Hai Laogong’s death, Wei Xiaobao had not ordered his men to take it out.

Rui Dong laughed aloud and reached down into the tub, but he only grabbed empty space, because Wei Xiaobao had quickly

curled his body up. Yet because the water tub was not too big, by the next grab Rui Dong managed to seize the back of Wei Xiaobao's collar, and raised him up, still dripping wet.

Wei Xiaobao opened his mouth and spurted water into Rui Dong's eyes, while throwing himself forward to embrace Rui Dong's chest, and snaked his left arm behind Rui Dong's neck. Rui Dong let out a loud shout and shook his body several times, his hand holding the back of Wei Xiaobao's collar gradually loosened. His face was full of water, but his eyes were open very wide, with a mixture of startled, frightened, and perplexed expression on his face. His throat made a gurgling noise, as if he wanted to speak but could not speak. There was a light stabbing noise, the tip of a dagger appeared on his chest and sliced down to his lower abdomen, cutting up a long gash along his torso.

With eyes wide open Rui Dong looked at the dagger, he did not know where the dagger had come from. From his chest down to his abdomen blood was gushing out wildly, suddenly he fell backward. Until his death he still did not know how Wei Xiaobao had killed him.

"Hey!" Wei Xiaobao exclaimed; he pulled the dagger with his left hand, while bringing out his right hand from his own long gown. What happened was that when he fell into the water tub, while curling up his body, he extracted the dagger and hid it inside his long gown facing outward. He spurted the water onto Rui Dong's face that he could not open his eyes, and then Wei Xiaobao threw himself forward. As he embraced Rui Dong, the sharp dagger that can cut iron like slicing mud pierced Rui Dong's chest. If they were in a real fight, ten Wei Xiaobaos were not Rui Dong's match, but in the flurry of hasty and strange turn of events, this awe-inspiring, illustrious Deputy Chief Rui had fallen into Wei Xiaobao's plot.

How Wei Xiaobao and Rui Dong, two people, dashed into the

room, how Wei Xiaobao fell into the water tub, Fang Yi and Mu Jianping were able to see everything clearly from behind the mosquito net; but as Rui Dong grabbed Wei Xiaobao out of the tub and was killed immediately, Fang and Mu, two women were unable to make head or tail of what trick Wei Xiaobao had used.

Wei Xiaobao wanted to toot his own horn, he said, "I … I … this … this …" only to head his own voice sounded hoarse, unexpectedly he was unable to speak, but his narrow escape from the death just now had scared him out of his wits.

"Thank Heaven and thank the Earth," Mu Jianping said, "Unexpectedly you … have killed this Tatar."

"This Rui Dong's nickname is 'Unequalled Iron Palm'," Fang Yi said, "Tonight he had killed three or our Mu Palace's brothers. You have avenged us, very good, very good!"

Wei Xiaobao calmed down and said, "He was the 'Unequalled Iron Palm', but he could not match me, Wei … Gui Gonggong, Wu Laogong. I am a first-class martial art expert, naturally it's not the same." Stretching out his hand, he groped Rui Dong's pocket, and took out a booklet full of small characters, and several other documents.

Since Wei Xiaobao could not read, he casually set everything aside. Suddenly he felt some kind of solid object hidden behind Rui Dong's lower back. Using his dagger he cut open Rui Dong's gown, and found a package wrapped in cloth. "What kind of treasure is this?" he wondered, "Why did he hide it well like this?" Cutting the silk cord on the package, he opened the cloth wrapper and found a book. Surprisingly, the cover of the book had these five characters on it: 'Forty-two Chapter Sutra'. The size of this sutra was identical to the ones he had seen, only the seal was of red silk with white border around it.

"Aiyo!" Wei Xiaobao cried out; hastily he put his hands into his pocket and extracted the copy of 'Forty-two Chapter Sutra' he

took from Prince Kang's mansion. Luckily when he jumped into the water tub he was immediately grabbed by Rui Dong so only the outer surface of the envelope was wet, the pages of the book stayed dry.

He placed both copies on the table, the two books were identical except the red silk and the red silk with white border covers. Up to this point he had seen four copies of 'Forty-two Chapter Sutra'. Presently, two were in the Empress Dowager's hands, and two were in his own hands. "There must be something odd inside these sutras, too bad I can't read" he mused, "If I ask Xiao Junzhu and Miss Fang to take a look, I'm sure I will understand. But if I did, they would look down on me." Pulling the drawer open, he put the two books away.

He thought, "A moment ago the Empress Dowager personally came to kill me, she must be afraid I would find her secret and reveal it out. Afterwards she also sent this Rui Dong to kill me, on a random accusation that I led the assassins into the Palace. She has been waiting for a while now, if she did not see Rui Dong return, she would send another man over. I might as well strike first and gain the upper hand by immediately going to His Majesty to lodge a complaint. Come daybreak, *laozi* will flee the Palace and won't comeback."

He said to Fang Yi, "I must go out and start a rumor that this Rui Dong has colluded with your Mu Palace people. Good wi … good wi … Miss Fang (he was going to call her 'good wife', but realizing the urgency of the situation, he knew he must not fool around and thus fail the important matter, therefore, he corrected himself by calling her 'Miss Fang'), what was your real intention in entering the Palace tonight? Did you intend to assassinate the Emperor? I urge you not to assassinate the young emperor; that old wh0re the Empress Dowager is not a good thing, it would be much better if you assassinate her."

"Since you are one of us, it's not a big deal to tell you the

truth,” Fang Yi said, “We disguised ourselves as the subordinated of Wu Yingxiong, Wu Sangui’s son, coming to the Palace to assassinate the Tatar Emperor. If everything went well, of course it would be great, but if not, we hope in his anger the Emperor would kill Wu Sangui.”

“Phew!” Wei Xiaobao let out a breath and said, “Brilliant scheme! Brilliant scheme! But how are you going to implicate Wu Sangui?”

Fang Yi said, “On our undergarments we deliberately leave some marking, the seal of troops under Ping Xi Wang’s command, also our weapons and secret projectiles are engraved with Ping Xi Wang’s Palace inscription. We have several old weapons bearing the inscription ‘Regional Commander Office of Shanhai Pass[7] of The Great Ming’.”

“What for?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Fang Yi explained, “Before that servant Wu Sangui surrendered to the Tatars, he was the Regional Commander of our Great Ming’s Shanhai Pass.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded. “This scheme is very formidable,” he said.

Fang Yi continued, “We entered the Palace this time, in all likelihood there would be people die for our country, in that case the marking on their clothes will be discovered by the Tatars. Supposing that we were caught, at first we won’t confess, then after the Tatars beat us until we are hovering between life and death, only then will we confess that we have received Ping Xi Wang’s order to come and assassinate the Emperor. As soon as we entered the Palace, we abandoned engraved weapons everywhere, so that if by chance we all are lucky enough to retreat completely, we have already left some incriminating evidence.” She was talking with excitement, her breathing gradually quickened, a blush appeared on her cheeks.

Wei Xiaobao said, “So you came to the Palace not to rescue Xiao Junzhu at all?”

“Of course not,” Fang Yi replied, “We are not immortals, how could we know Xiao Junzhu was unexpectedly in the Palace?”

Wei Xiaobao nodded. “Do you have any engraved weapon with you?” he asked.

“I do!” Fang Yi replied. From the quilt she produced a sword, but her arm was lacking strength that she was unable to raise the sword up.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Luckily I did not sleep by your side, otherwise you would have killed me with the sword.” Fang Yi blushed, she glowered at him.

Wei Xiaobao took the sword and concealed it in Rui Dong’s dead body’s waist. “I am going to lodge a complaint that this Rui Dong was in cahoots with the assassins; isn’t it enough evidence?” he said.

Fang Yi shook her head and said, “Look at the sword, what characters are engraved there?”

Wei Xiaobao asked her back, “What characters are engraved there?” In any case, even if he looked at the engraving he would not recognize any character, so he would rather not look.

Fang Yi said, “Those are the eight characters ‘Regional Commander Office of Shanhai Pass of The Great Ming’; this Rui Dong was a Manchu, he could not be an officer under the Regional Commander of Shanhai Pass of The Great Ming.”

“Um,” Wei Xiaobao retrieved the sword and put it back on the bed, saying, “What kind of booty should I hide on his body then?” And then he got an idea, “Got it!” he said. He took the two strings of pearls he received as gift from Wu Yingxiong earlier, and the pair of emerald chicken, and also the bundle of gold banknotes, and stuffed everything into Rui Dong’s pocket.

He knew the gold banknotes were issued by a Beijing bank, Wu Yingxiong must have sent his men to buy them. They only need to investigate the bank, and then the origin of the banknotes would be found out. This way of framing somebody was truly flawless; he said in his heart, “Heir Apparent Wu, oh Heir Apparent Wu, it’s very important for *laozi* to save my own life, I have no choice but to offend you.”

Picking up Rui Dong’s body, he was thinking of moving the body into the garden outside, but he only took a single step when suddenly he heard footsteps outside the room. He lay the body back down gently, and heard someone called, “His Majesty’s order: Xiao Guizi to wait upon His Majesty immediately.”

Wei Xiaobao was delighted; he thought, “I was worried that I could not see His Majesty tonight, and then everything will go wrong again. Presently His Majesty is summoning me, nothing’s better than that. I can’t move Rui Dong’s body now.” He replied, “Yes, let your servant change clothes, and then I’ll go immediately.”

He gently shoved Rui Dong’s body underneath the bed, and then made some hand signals to Xiao Junzhu and Fang Yi, telling them to stay under the quilt and not make any movement. Then he hurriedly took off his wet clothes and changed into another set of clothing. Although the black silk padded vest was also wet, he did not remove it.

He was about to walk out when he suddenly had a thought, “This little girl surnamed Fang is not too trustworthy, she might steal my belongings.” So he took the two copies of ‘Forty-two Chapter Sutra’ and a large bundle of banknotes and stuffed everything into his pocket before leaving the room, but he forgot to take along the martial art manual which his *Shifu* had given him.

Chapter 12
With comical words I play charade, thus defeating Qing like a deity.
(Translated by Foxs)

At the Upper Study Room Kangxi asked about the assassins' martial art style. Wei Xiaobao had a brainwave, his hands and feet drew a living picture, he demonstrated two moves. Kangxi recognized the Mu Family's martial art style, one was 'Sweeping Away a Thousand Army', the other was 'High mountain flowing water'; he was very happy.

Wei Xiaobao went out the front door and saw four eunuchs standing outside, but he did not recognize a single one.

The leader said, “Gui Gong-gong, very late at night His Majesty wanted to see you, tsk tsk tsk, the way His Majesty is treating you needs not be mentioned. Where is Deputy Chief Rui? His Majesty also sends for him, so he can have audience together with Gui Gong-gong.”

Wei Xiaobao shivered inwardly, he said, “Has Deputy Chief Rui returned to the Palace? I have never seen him.”

“Is that so?” the eunuch said, “Let us go first then.” Finished speaking, he turned around and walked off.

Wei Xiaobao was inwardly bewildered, “Why did he ask me about Deputy Chief Rui? How did His Majesty know that Deputy Chief Rui came to see me?” He also thought, “I am a Vice Manager eunuch, my rank is a lot higher than yours, how can you walk in front of me? You are not a young eunuch, could it be that you don’t understand the Palace’s custom?” He asked, “Gong-gong, what’s your honorable surname? We haven’t seen each other often in the past.”

The eunuch replied, “I am only a low-level eunuch having no fixed duties, naturally Gui Gong-gong does not remember me.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “His Majesty is sending Gong-gong to summon me, that’s not the job of a low-level eunuch having no fixed duties.” While talking, he noticed that the eunuch was turning westward, while the Emperor’s personal palace was on the northeast side. “Are you lost?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“No,” the eunuch replied, “His Majesty is paying his respect to the Empress Dowager. With the disturbance of the assassins just now, he was afraid it startled the Compassionate One. We are going to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful.”

As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard that they were going to see the Empress Dowager, he was shocked and instantly halted his

steps. From the three eunuchs walking behind him, two suddenly moved to the side and stood to the left and right of him, so that the four people surrounded him in the middle.

Wei Xiaobao was even more alarmed; he cried inwardly, “Bad, bad! It’s not His Majesty who sent for me, clearly it is the Empress Dowager who wants to get me.” Although he did not know whether these four people knew martial art or not, with one against four he would not be able to achieve a short victory, as soon as the fight started, the Imperial Bodyguards would hear and would rush in, how could he escape? His heart was thumping madly, but with a chuckle he said, “So we are going to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful? That’s great! Each time the Empress Dowager sees me, she always bestows me, if not money, then candy, cakes and pastries. The Empress Dowager treats her servants very well. She said I am a gluttonous little child, she always bestows me a lot of things to eat.” While speaking, he started walking again toward the winding corridor leading to the Empress Dowager’s personal palace. Seeing him heading toward the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful just like he said, the four eunuchs resumed their former position of one in front and three behind.

“Last time I saw the Empress Dowager, my luck was really good,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Empress Dowager said that by arresting Oboi, my meritorious service was not small, so she bestowed me five thousand *taels* of gold and twenty thousand *taels* of silver. My strength is indeed too small, how could I move them all? Empress Dowager said: ‘If you can’t move them all, move them slowly. Xiao Guizi, what are you going to do with your money?’ I said, ‘Reporting to Empress Dowager: your servant loves to make friends the most, now that I have gold and silver in my possession, whichever eunuch comes to your servant, your servant will simply give them some. Let everybody become rich and spend the money together!’” His mouth was blabbering nonsense, his brain was racing with

thoughts of escape plan.

One of the eunuchs behind him said, “How could she bestow you that much?”

“Ha, you don’t believe me?” Wei Xiaobao said, “Look at me.” From his pocket he fished a large bundle of banknotes; some were five-hundred *tael* denominations, some were a thousand *tael* denominations, and some were two-thousand *tael* denominations.

Under the lantern light, the banknotes looked genuine. The four eunuchs were breathless, they all halted their steps.

Wei Xiaobao pulled four banknotes, and said with a laugh, “His Majesty and Empress Dowager unceasingly bestow me with money, how can I spend everything by myself? Here I have four banknotes, two-thousand *taels* and one-thousand *taels* worth, four brothers may try your luck, each of you draw out one banknote.”

Four eunuchs did not believe him, where in the world would there be anybody who handed several thousand *taels* of money casually like that? Nobody reached out to draw.

“I have too much money with me,” Wei Xiaobao said, “And I have nowhere to spend it, sometimes I am not too happy. Right now I am going to see Empress Dowager and His Majesty, I don’t know how much more money they are going to bestow me.” While saying that, he held the banknotes high above his head that the banknotes fluttered in the wind, while with the corner of his eyes he looked around at the surrounding terrain.

One of the eunuchs laughed and said, “Gui Gong-gong, are you really going to give the banknotes to us? You are not joking, are you?”

“Why would I joke?” Wei Xiaobao said, “Which brother in our Catering Department has never received a thousand or eight hundred *taels* from me? Come, come, come, try your luck.

Which brother will draw first?”

Giggling, the eunuch said, “I’ll draw first.”

“Wait a moment,” Wei Xiaobao said, “All of you, look clearly.” He held the four banknotes under the lantern light. The four eunuchs looked distinctly, the banknotes were really of one-thousand *tael* and two-thousand *tael* denominations, they could not restrain their faces from changing. Eunuchs cannot take wife and raise a family, they cannot serve in the army or take official post; therefore, they are twice more fond of gold, silver and other belongings than ordinary people. Although these four men had been serving in the Palace for a long time, they had never seen a one-thousand *tael* or two-thousand *tael* banknotes.

Wei Xiaobao raised his hand and let the banknotes fluttered in the wind, he laughed and said, “Alright, this *Dage* can draw first!”

The eunuch reached out, but before his finger touched the banknotes, Wei Xiaobao let go, four banknotes were blown by the wind, lightly fluttered in the air, and flew toward the cluster of flowers. “Aiyo!” Wei Xiaobao cried out, “Why didn’t you grab firmly? Hurry, hurry, whoever grabs the banknote, it will belong to him.” The four eunuchs leaped to run after the banknotes.

“Grab it quick! Don’t let it fly away!” Wei Xiaobao called out. He ducked down and quickly slipped into an opening between the fake rocks, which he had already picked beforehand. He knew that the fake rocks in this area of the imperial garden were extremely numerous, with series of winding caves. Once he entered in, he would not be easy to find in a short time.

The four eunuchs ran after the banknotes, two picked one banknote each, one caught two banknotes, but one was left empty-handed. These two immediately broke into an argument. One eunuch said, “Gui Gong-gong says that whoever grabs the

banknote, it will belong to him, so these two banknotes are mine."

The other one said, "We have agreed on one banknote per person, quickly give my share of one banknote to me. I'll be happy to take the one-thousand *taels* note."

"What one-thousand *taels* note?" the other eunuch said, "It's easy for you to say. You won't get even one *tael*."

The one who did not get any banknotes grabbed him by the chest, saying, "Are you or are you not going to give it to me? We'll ask Gui Gong-gong to be the judge." But when he turned around, Wei Xiaobao had already disappeared. The four eunuchs were shocked; they cried out together and looked for him everywhere. The one who did not get any banknote was unwilling to give up; he grabbed the one who had two banknotes by the front of his jacket and demanded him to give his share.

Wei Xiaobao had already a dozen of *zhang* away inside the cave, hearing the two people shouting and arguing, he was secretly amused; he thought, "I am going to hide until daybreak, then I'll slip out of the Palace from the side door, and never to come back."

He heard one of the eunuchs said, "Empress Dowager has ordered us that whatever happens we must summon Gui Gong-gong and Deputy Chief Rui immediately. He … he … where can he hide?"

Another eunuch said, "He is in the Palace, he can't hide too far. Only, we must not say anything about him giving us banknotes. Hao *Xiongdi*, you'd better give one of your two banknotes to Xiao Lao, otherwise he might reveal it, then we all cannot get the riches, that will be really bad."

Suddenly Wei Xiaobao heard footsteps, there were people coming from the west. One of them said, "With the disturbance

of the assassins in the Palace tonight, I am afraid everybody will receive disciplinary action tomorrow.” As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard this, he knew they were Palace Imperial Bodyguards.

Another man said, "I hope Gui Gong-gong will speak several words of praise in front of His Majesty."

Yet another man commented, "Although Gui Gong-gong is young, he really treasures friendship with other people; someone like him is truly rare."

Wei Xiaobao was delighted, he slipped out of the cave and said in a low voice, "Brothers, please be quiet."

The two leading Imperial Bodyguards raised their lanterns. "Gui Gong-gong," they called softly.

Wei Xiaobao saw there were about fifteen, sixteen Imperial Bodyguards, they were precisely the group of men who came to his window a moment ago. He remembered some of their names. "Zhang *Dage*, Zhao *Dage*," he said, "The four eunuchs over there are colluding with the assassins, quickly arrest them, your meritorious service won't be small." He then proceeded by calling several other names, "He *Dage*, E *Dage*, please seal those four people's mute acupoints first, or strike their chin first, don't let them shout loudly and thus disturbing His Majesty."

Hearing it was only four eunuchs, the Imperial Bodyguards thought nothing of it; they made hand signal and blew out the lanterns. Crouching down low, they slowly crept forward. Out of the four eunuchs, two were busy looking for Wei Xiaobao in the caves, while the other two were still bickering over the banknotes, nobody paid any attention to their surroundings. The Imperial Bodyguards closed in from all directions; with a low whistle everybody come out, three, four men rounded up one eunuch, very soon the four eunuchs were pinned to the

ground. These Imperial Bodyguards did not have high level of martial art skill, nobody knew how to seal acupoints; some of them used *qin na* technique, some used their palms and fists, they all struck and dislodged the four eunuchs' chins. The eunuchs tried to open their mouths, but were unable to make any noise. Not knowing what had happened, they were extremely frightened.

Wei Xiaobao pointed toward a building off to the side. "Drag them in and interrogate!" he shouted. The Imperial Bodyguards dragged the eunuchs on the ground toward the front hall of the building. Somebody lighted the lantern and raised it high. Wei Xiaobao sat in the middle of the hall, the Imperial Bodyguards dragged the eunuchs and made them kneel down in front of him.

These four eunuchs had received the Empress Dowager's order to arrest Wei Xiaobao, how could they be willing to kneel down in front of him? The Imperial Bodyguards punched and kicked and made them kneel.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Just now the four of you were sneaky, what were you fighting about? Saying one-thousand *taels* is yours, two-thousand *taels* is mine? You also said something about the luck of the friends from the outside was not good, that a lot of them were killed by the dogs Imperial Bodyguards. Who are these 'friends from the outside'? Why did you call Imperial Bodyguards the 'dogs Imperial Bodyguards'?"

The Imperial Bodyguards were angry, they kicked these four people's backs. In their belly the four eunuchs cried out, 'Injustice!' but how could they utter anything?

Wei Xiaobao continued, "I was following behind you, I heard one of you said, 'It was me who lead the way, those two banknotes were given to me, how can I share it with you?'" While saying that, he pointed to the eunuch who caught two banknotes, and then he pointed to the eunuch who did not get

anything and said, "You said, 'We all did this important matter together, beheading or confiscation of property, the criminal charge is the same, why can't you share it with me? That won't do, you must share.'" And then he pointed to another eunuch and said, "You said, 'Hao *Xiongdi*, you'd better give one of your two banknotes to Xiao Lao, otherwise he might reveal it, then we all cannot get the riches, that will be really bad.' You did say that, didn't you? What important matter did you do together? Why is there any criminal charge of beheading or confiscation of property? What banknotes have to be shared?"

The Imperial Bodyguards said, "They guided the assassins into the Palace, naturally the criminal charge is either beheading or confiscation of property. As for the banknotes to be shared, let's just search their bodies." As soon as they searched, immediately those four banknotes were found. Seeing such a huge amount of money on the banknotes, the Imperial Bodyguards were shouting and yelling. One ordinary eunuch's monthly salary was only four to six *taels* of silver; suddenly each of them had a huge sum of money in their possession, how could the accusation be false?

The Imperial Bodyguard by the surname Zhao asked the eunuch who had two banknotes, "Are you surnamed Hao?" The eunuch nodded. The Imperial Bodyguard surnamed Zhao also asked the eunuch who did not have any banknote, "And you are surnamed Lao?" The eunuch's countenance turned ghastly pale, but he also nodded.

Another Imperial Bodyguard said, "Alright, the assassins gave you this much money, and you led them in. You call them 'friends from the outside' and call us 'dogs Imperial Bodyguards'. Your granny!" He lifted his foot and kicked as hard as he could, the eunuch surnamed Hao's eyes were bulging, while his mouth repeatedly made a 'heh, heh' noise.

"Don't be rude and hasty," the Imperial Bodyguard surnamed

Zhao said, “We must interrogate well.” Stooping down, he reached onto the eunuch surnamed Lao’s jaw and fixed his chin.

Wei Xiaobao shouted, “What you did was a big thing, who actually prompted you? How dare you! Quickly confess!”

“Injustice! Injustice!” the eunuch cried out, “It was the Empress Dowager who ordered us …”

Wei Xiaobao leaped forward and closed his mouth; “Nonsense!” he shouted, “You dare to say such thing? If you talk too much, I’ll kill you immediately.” With his right hand he drew the dagger, turning over the hilt, he knocked the crown of the eunuch’s head twice so that he fainted. Turning his head toward the Imperial Bodyguards, Wei Xiaobao said, “He said they received the order from the Empress Dowager. This … this … we are facing an imminent catastrophe.”

The Imperial Bodyguards’ countenances immediately changed, they said, “The Empress Dowager ordered them to let the assassins entering the Palace?” They all knew that the Emperor was not the Empress Dowager’s son, the Empress Dowager was always astute and firm, could it be that the Emperor had offended the Empress Dowager, and thus ... and thus

there was a constant strife within the Palace gates? It was such a dreadful intrigue, and unexpectedly they were now being implicated, which was really a matter of life and death.

Wei Xiaobao asked another eunuch, "Was it really the Empress Dowager who sent you to do this thing? This a matter of great responsibility, you must not talk nonsense. Was it really the Empress Dowager?" The eunuch was unable to speak, he could only nod his head repeatedly.

"These several banknotes," Wei Xiaobao asked again, "Did the Empress Dowager give you?" Three eunuchs shook their heads together. "Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "You only received order, it

was not your own idea at all, was it?" The three eunuchs repeatedly nodded their heads. "Do you want to live, or do you want to die?" Wei Xiaobao asked. This question was not easy to answer by simply nodding their heads. Of the three eunuchs, one nodded his head, one shook his head, another one nodded first, then shook his head, but thinking it was not the right answer, he nodded his head vigorously again.

"So you want to die?" Wei Xiaobao asked. The three men shook their heads. "So you want to live?" Wei Xiaobao asked again. The three men quickly nodded their heads.

Wei Xiaobao pulled away the two Imperial Bodyguard leaders, they walked outside the room. Wei Xiaobao said in a low voice, "Zhang *Dage*, Zhao *Dage*, I am afraid our livelihood has just been taken away."

The one surnamed Zhang was Zhang Kangnian, the one surnamed Zhao was Zhao Qixian, they were both Han people, and both were already scared out their wits. "What ... what should we do?" they both asked.

"I don't have the slightest idea," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Zhang *Dage*, Zhao *Dage*, do you have any idea?"

Zhang Kangnian said, "If this matter is known, I don't know how big the uproar it will create, it would be best if we can cover it up."

"That's right," Zhao Qixian said, "It would be better if we can just let these four eunuchs go, and everybody simply pretend it never happened."

Zhang Kangnian said, "But I am afraid the human did not harm the tiger, the tiger has the intention to harm the human."

Wei Xiaobao said, "It is indeed fabulous if we can let them go, but we must tell them not to report anything to the Empress Dowager. Otherwise, in her anger the Empress Dowager would kill people to close their mouths; these four eunuchs would not

live, but most likely the seventeen of us here would also turn into thirty four pieces."

Zhang and Zhao, two people shivered. Zhang Kangnian raised his right palm and made a hacking motion. Wei Xiaobao looked at Zhao Qixian. Zhao Qixian nodded, he asked, "What about those four banknotes?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "You may divide these six thousand *taels* among the brothers. I am scared out of my wits, I only hope that I won't be implicated in this matter, I don't want the money."

Hearing there would be six thousand *taels* to be divided among them, which translated to more than three hundred *taels* per person, Zhang and Zhao's hesitation was gone. They went back into the room, and whispered something to their four trusted aides' ears. The four men nodded; they pulled the four eunuchs up and said, "Since you are Empress Dowager's men, we'll take you back!"

The four eunuchs were delighted, they left the room with the four Imperial Bodyguards following behind them. Suddenly they heard a series of blood-curdling screams from the outside, followed by an Imperial Bodyguard shouted, "Assassins, assassins!" Another Imperial Bodyguard cried out, "Aiyo, not good, the assassins killed four eunuchs."

The four Imperial Bodyguards returned to the room, and reported to Wei Xiaobao, "Gui Gong-gong, there were assassins outside, they killed four Gong-gong."

Wei Xiaobao heaved a deep sigh and said, "It's a pity, it's a pity! The assassins ran away and could not be apprehended?"

An Imperial Bodyguard replied, "We can't even see the assassins' shadow."

"Um, there's nothing we can do then," Wei Xiaobao said, "You'd better report this matter of four Gong-gong

assassinations clearly to Dolong *Zongguan*!"

Suppressing their smile, the Imperial Bodyguards replied together, "Yes!" Wei Xiaobao could not hold his laugh anymore, he burst into loud laughter. The Imperial Bodyguards also broke into continuous laughter. "Brothers," Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "Congratulations on your newfound wealth. I will see you tomorrow."

Wei Xiaobao hurriedly returned to his dwelling. When he reached the front door, a cold voice from the flowering shrub greeted him, “Xiao Guizi, how are you?” Wei Xiaobao recognized it as the Empress Dowager’s voice; he was shocked. Turning around, he started to run, but after only five, six steps, a hand had touched his left shoulder, and his entire body went numb, as if a several-hundred-catty large boulder was pressing down on him that he was unable to take another step. Hastily he stooped down to withdraw the dagger, but his fingers had just touched the hilt when his right arm was hit by a palm. “Ah!” he could not bear not to scream.

He heard Empress Dowager’s chilly voice said, “Xiao Guizi, you are young, yet have really good ability. Without lifting a finger you managed to kill my four eunuchs and still planted some booty to shift the blame on someone else, you even dare to plant false evidence against me. Humph, humph …”

In his heart Wei Xiaobao groaned bitterly, he was desperate, thinking that the Empress Dowager hated him to the bone, so no matter how he plead with her, it would be useless. He could only gamble with his life, trying desperately to scare her so that he could gain a little time, and thus thought of an idea to escape. “Empress Dowager,” he said, “If you kill me now, it would be too late. It’s a pity, it’s a pity.”

The Empress Dowager coldly said, “Pity what?”

“You want to kill me to shut my mouth,” Wei Xiaobao said,

“It’s a pity you are one step too late. Just now what those Imperial Bodyguards have said, presumably … presumably you have heard everything.”

The Empress Dowager grimly said, “You said I sent those four useless eunuchs to lead the assassins into the Palace. Humph, why would I do that?”

“How would I know?” Wei Xiaobao replied, “But most likely His Majesty would know.” In all honesty he already felt that he was ninety percent dead, so he might as well swindle her to the end.

The Empress Dowager was furious; with a cold laugh she said, “Once I send away my palm, your life will be gone immediately. Unavoidably it will be too easy for you, this little thief.”

“That’s right,” Wei Xiaobao said, “As soon as you exert strength on your palm, you would kill Xiao Guizi. By tomorrow everybody would know, ‘How did Xiao Guizi die?’ ‘Naturally the Empress Dowager killed him.’ ‘Why did the Empress Dowager kill him?’ ‘Because Xiao Guizi accidentally expose Empress Dowager’s secret.’ ‘What secret?’ ‘This matter is complicated and not easy to explain succinctly; come, come, come, you come to my room, I’ll tell you everything. But you must never tell it to anybody else, this matter is … is of an utmost importance.’”

The Empress Dowager was so angry that her hand on Wei Xiaobao’s shoulder did not stop trembling; after taking a slow breath she said, “At worst it’s only those dozen or so Imperial Bodyguards. After I killed you, I will order Rui Dong to arrest those dozen fellows and put them to death immediately, and then what else should I worry about?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud. The Empress Dowager said, “Death is imminent, and you can still laughing.” Wei Xiaobao said, “Empress Dowager, you said you wanted Rui Dong to kill

those people? He … he … ha ha …”

“He what?” the Empress Dowager asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “He has already …” Originally he wanted to say, ‘he has already been killed by my blade,’ but suddenly he was hit upon an inspiration, he laughed ‘ha ha’ several more times.

The Empress Dowager asked again, “He has already what?”

“He has already listened to me, he won’t obey your orders anymore,” Wei Xiaobao said.

The Empress Dowager laughed coldly and said, “You are but a little demon yet you think you have that kind of ability, you can tell Deputy Chief Rui not to obey my orders anymore.”

“I am only a little eunuch,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Naturally he is not afraid of me. But the one Deputy Chief Rui is afraid of is another person.”

With a trembling voice the Empress Dowager said, “He … he is afraid of His Majesty?”

“We all are servants,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Naturally we are afraid of His Majesty; you can’t blame him for that, can you?”

“What else did you tell Rui Dong?” the Empress Dowager asked.

“I told him everything,” Wei Xiaobao replied.

“He told him everything,” the Empress Dowager muttered to herself. After a half day of silence, she said, “He … where is he?”

“He went far away,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Very, very far away, and he won’t come back. Empress Dowager, if you want to see him, naturally that’s a good thing, very, very good thing; however, I am afraid it won’t be that easy.”

The Empress Dowager was startled. “Has he left the Palace?”

she asked.

Wei Xiaobao pushed the boat with the current. “Exactly,” he said, “He said that he was afraid of His Majesty, but he was also afraid of you. Pressed between the two, he felt it would be hard for him to conduct himself as a human being, he is also afraid he will have his own life to be worried about. Before facing the calamity of losing his life, it would be better for him to take the high road and fly away.”

“To fly high and run far[8],” the Empress Dowager corrected.

“That’s it, that’s it,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Empress Dowager, how did you know? Have you heard him saying those words? He has flown high and run far!”

“Humph,” the Empress Dowager snorted, “He doesn’t even want to be an officer anymore?” she asked, “Where is he going?”

“He … he is going …” he had another idea, “He said he is going to some Tai mountain, some Liu Tai, Qi Tai, or Ba Tai mountain.”

“Wu Tai[9] Mountain!” the Empress Dowager said.

“That’s right, that’s right! It’s Wutai Mountain,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Empress Dowager, you know everything.”

“What else did he say?” the Empress Dowager asked.

“He did not say much,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Just that … just that this matter that I entrusted to him, he will accomplish no matter what, he even put himself under a heavy oath, that even if he is to be chopped to pieces, he would definitely have his son and grandson to do it.”

“What matter you entrusted to him?” the Empress Dowager asked.

“Nothing much,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Deputy Chief Rui actually

said that it's not a big deal to him not being an officer, but he is to go on a journey without any traveling allowance, plus it is not a matter that can be accomplished in a year or half a year. Thereupon I gave him banknotes worth twenty thousand *taels*."

The Empress Dowager said, "You suddenly become very wealthy, where did the money come from?"

"Those are gifts from others," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Prince Kang gave me some, Songgotu *Daren* gave me some, Wu Sangui's son also gave me some."

"The way you act is forthright, naturally Rui Dong is grateful and he is seeking to repay your kindness," the Empress Dowager said, "Actually, what did you want him to do?"

"Your servant does not dare to speak," Wei Xiaobao said.

"Are you going to speak or not?" the Empress Dowager asked with a stern voice. She increased the pressure of her palm, which was resting on Wei Xiaobao's shoulder. "Aiyo!" Wei Xiaobao cried out. The Empress Dowager relaxed her grip somewhat. "Quickly speak!" she shouted.

Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, "Deputy Chief Rui promised me, if your servant is killed inside the Palace, he will immediately report everything clearly to His Majesty. He said he is going to write a memorial to the throne, which he will carry with him. He and your servant have agreed that every two months, your servant … your servant will …"

The Empress Dowager's voice was trembling when she asked, "What is it?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Every two months, your servant will go to the Heavenly Bridge, looking for someone … a man selling candied fruits[10]. I should ask him, 'Do you have jadeite cornelian candied fruits?' He will reply, 'I do, it's a hundred *taels* per skewer.' I'll say, 'That expensive? Will you sell it to me for

two hundred *taels*?' He will say, 'No, I will not. You haven't returned to the heaven?' And then I'll say, 'Go tell that old man then!' And then he would report to the Deputy Chief Rui." In this desperate situation, he did not have time to fabricate a fresh story, so he simply modified the code words taught by Chen Jinnan if he wanted to communicate with Xu Tianchuan.

"Humph," the Empress Dowager snorted, "That's the way the network of people and warriors of Jianghu communicate with each other, I believe a little thief like you won't come up with stuff like that yourself. It was that coward Rui Dong who taught you that, wasn't it?"

Wei Xiaobao faked a surprised look. "Uh!" he exclaimed, "How did you know it was Deputy Chief Rui who taught me? I get it, when he taught me that, you must be eavesdropping."

He felt the Empress Dowager's hand on his shoulder was trembling continuously. It was after a long time that she finally asked, "When the time comes and you do not go to find that candied fruits seller, what will happen then?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Deputy Chief Rui said that he will wait for ten more days. If I still do not show up, then that means your servant's little life has gone. He … he will think of a way to report to His Majesty. By that time your servant is already dead, so there is nothing to be gained actually, but your servant is loyal to His Majesty, I want to warn His Majesty to be really careful, to requite any wrongdoings, to avenge any enmity, and to guard against others' evil scheme, which are actually Deputy Chief Rui and your servant's primary devotion anyway."

"To requite any wrongdoings, to avenge any enmity," the Empress Dowager muttered to herself, "That's very good."

"These days," Wei Xiaobao continued, "When your servant is waiting on His Majesty, I have never revealed anything. As long as your servant is alive and well, I am serving His Majesty by

his side, I will forever not let His Majesty know about this matter; why would I want to worry His Majesty?”

The Empress Dowager let out a breath and said, “You are actually a very good boy.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “His Majesty treats your servant very well, the Empress Dowager also did not treat your servant badly. Your servant is loyal to the Empress Dowager. Who knows? Perhaps when the Empress Dowager is happy, she would reward your servant something; won’t everybody be good?”

“Hey, hey, hey,” the Empress Dowager let out a cold laugh, “You still want me to reward you? Your face indeed has a very thick skin.” Surprisingly, there was a hint of delight in her cold laugh; by the tone of her voice, she also seemed to be greatly relieved.

Hearing the change in her tone, Wei Xiaobao knew the tension was greatly relaxed; he said hurriedly, “What else does your servant covet? As long as Empress Dowager and His Majesty are safe and sound, everybody’s getting along politely and amiably, that will be great fortune for us as servants. Empress Dowager, I wish you, Senior, ten thousand good fortune and peace like gold, your servant will go to the Heavenly Bridge tomorrow, I’ll find that man, and will tell him to inform Deputy Chief Rui as soon as possible, telling him to guard his mouth like a closed bottle. Your servant … wants to bring him three thousand *taels*, I will say that it is a gift from the Empress Dowager.”

“Humph,” the Empress Dowager said, “This man did not do his job to the best of his ability, he abandoned his duty and fled away. He is lucky that I don’t chop off his head, and you want me to reward him?”

“Yes, yes!” Wei Xiaobao said, “Naturally your servant will have to foot the three thousand *taels* bill myself, how can the

Empress Dowager still reward him some money?”

The Empress Dowager slowly released her grip on Wei Xiaobao’s shoulder, and she slowly asked, “Xiao Guizi, are you really loyal to me?”

Wei Xiaobao kneeled down on the ground and kowtowed repeatedly, saying, “Your servant is loyal to the Empress Dowager, and will enjoy countless benefits, if I am not loyal, let my melon-seed-shape head be removed. Although Xiao Guizi is muddleheaded, this head is still very important to me.”

The Empress Dowager nodded; she said, “Very good, very good, very good!” As she said one ‘very good’, her palm struck his back once, repeatedly she struck three times. Immediately Wei Xiaobao felt dizzy, and had a strong urge to vomit, his throat emitted continuous ‘eh eh eh’ noise. The Empress Dowager said, “Xiao Guizi that night Hai Dafu, the old thief said that in this world there is a martial art skill called ‘Transforming Bones Soft Palm’, which if trained to perfection, when it hit a body, it can make the bones in the entire body broken. This martial art skill is very difficult to learn, naturally I can’t do it. But since you are a very smart child, very intelligent child, I am thinking that trying three palm strikes on your back will be very interesting.”

The *chi* and blood in Wei Xiaobao’s chest and abdomen bubbled up, finally he could not repress it anymore. ‘Wah!’ he vomited a big mouthful of blood and water. He thought, “The old wh0re did not believe me, she is striking me with such a vicious blow.”

“You don’t have to be afraid,” the Empress Dowager said, “I am not going to kill you. If you died, who would go to the Bridge of Heaven to find that candied fruits seller? I only want to injure you a little bit, to show you that the way you handled this matter is not particularly clever.”

“Thank you for the Empress Dowager’s kindness,” Wei Xiaobao said. He stood up slowly, but his body swayed and he fell back sitting down, and vomited several mouthfuls of water and blood again. The Empress Dowager laughed aloud, turned around, and disappeared into a flowering shrub.

Wei Xiaobao struggled to stand up, then slowly circled toward the rear window of his room. He leaned against the window frame, gasping for breath for a few moments before finally crawling into the room over the window.

“Gui *Dage*,” Xiao Junzhu Mu Jianping asked in low voice, “Is that you?”

Wei Xiaobao was not in a good mood, “F*ck your mother,” he cursed, “It’s not me.”

Fang Yi interjected, “Xiao Junzhu asked you nicely, why did you curse her?”

Wei Xiaobao had just crawled over the window opening, he said, “I …” but before he could finish, ‘Bang!’ he fell from the window onto the floor, and was unable to get up again.

“Aiyo!” Fang Yi and Mu Jianping cried out together. “What … what happened?” they asked in alarm, “Are you injured?”

Wei Xiaobao’s fall was really not light, but hearing the deep concern in the voices of these two women, his mood improved considerably. He laughed aloud and gasped several times while thinking, “I don’t know if the Old Wh0re’s strike was ‘Transforming Bones Soft Palm’ or not, maybe she has not trained it proficiently. *Laozi* is wearing the treasured vest, also my bones are hard; whatever it is she wanted to transform, I don’t think she can transform *laozi*’s bones …” He said, “My Good *Meizi* and Good Wife are both injured, if I don’t receive some injury, how can we be called ‘fortune we enjoy together, disaster we face together’?”

“Gui *Dage*,” Xiao Junzhu asked, “Where is your injury? Is it

painful?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Good *Meizi* is conscientious, asking me if it is painful. Actually, it was very painful, but hearing your concern, suddenly it is not painful anymore. Tell me, isn’t it strange?”

Mu Jianping laughed and said, “You are cracking jokes again.”

Propping himself on the table and gasping for breath, Wei Xiaobao got up. He thought, “Right now I still have my old life, but it depends entirely on Deputy Chief Rui’s friendship, whether he is willing to support me or not. If the Old Wh0re knew Deputy Chief Rui is dead, Wei Xiaobao’s old life will not stay for more than an hour.” From the medicine chest he fetched the triangular greenish-blue with white dot medicine bottle. Hai Laogong’s medicine chest was full of medicinal powder and pills, but he only recognized this one bottle of 'Corpse Transforming Powder'. Pulling Rui Dong’s corpse from underneath the bed, he took back the banknotes and the precious knick-knacks he stuffed into Rui Dong’s pocket earlier.

Mu Jianping said, "All along when you were away, this dead man was lying under our bed, the two of us were so scared that we might die ourselves."

Wei Xiaobao said, "If he scared the two of you the death, won't this dead man have two bashful flower obstructing the moon female companions?"

"Pei!" Fang Yi spat, "Xiao Junzhu, don't talk to him too much."

"I have a magic trick," Wei Xiaobao said, "Do you want to see it?"

"I don't want to," Fang Yi replied.

"If you don't want to look, then close your eyes," Wei Xiaobao said.

Fang Yi immediately closed her eyes. Following her example,

Mu Jianping also closed her eyes, but immediately she opened her eyes again.

Wei Xiaobao took a small silver spoon from the medicine chest, he pulled the wooden cork from the bottle, and took a small amount of the 'Corpse Transforming Powder' with the silver spoon, and poured it on Rui Dong's wound. A moment later, smoke started to rise from the wound, followed by strong odor. A few moments later, the wound emitted yellow liquid, while it rotted bigger and bigger. "Eek!" Mu Jianping cried out.

Fang Yi's curiosity was piqued, she opened her eyes. As soon as she saw this scene, her eyes opened very wide, she did not want to close them anymore.

As the corpse came in contact with the yellow liquid, it started to rot. The more the yellow liquid was produced, the faster the corpse rotted.

Seeing the frightened expression on these two women, Wei Xiaobao said, "When one of you is being disobedient to me, I will sprinkle a little bit of this precious powder on your face, then you will immediately rot like this."

"You ... don't scare people," Mu Jianping said. With glaring eyes Fang Yi stared at him, but her frightened expression was difficult to conceal. With a grin Wei Xiaobao took a step forward, he shook the medicine bottle twice in front of her face before he put it back into his pocket.

Not too long afterwards, Rui Dong's corpse had rotted into two sections. Wei Xiaobao picked up a chair, and using the legs of the chair he pushed the two sections of the corpse toward the yellow liquid. In less than an hour, everything had turned into yellow liquid. Wei Xiaobao let out a deep breath, thinking, "Even if the Old Wh0re sends a million troops to Wutai Mountain, they won't find Rui Dong." He went to the water jar to fetch a bucket of water to wash away the yellow liquid from the corpse. But

only after several buckets of water, his body skewed, he fell onto the bed, and in utmost exhaustion he fell asleep immediately.

When he awoke, the sky was already bright. His chest felt nauseous, so he tried to vomit, but nothing came out. He heard Mu Jianping's concerned voice asked, "Gui *Dage*, are you feeling better?"

Wei Xiaobao sat up, and only now did he realize that for the rest of the night he had been sleeping, fully clothed, by Fang and Mu, two women's feet. Seeing it was not early morning anymore, he hastily jumped down from the bed and said, "I have to hurry to see the Emperor, you two just lie down and don't move." He wanted to crawl out from the window, but the pain on his lower back was so severe that he had no choice but open the front door and locked it behind him.

Wei Xiaobao only waited for less than an hour at the Upper Study Room, Kangxi returned from his morning court. He said with a laugh, "Xiao Guizi, I heard you killed an assassin last night."

Wei Xiaobao paid his respect by saying, "May Your Majesty has good health."

Kangxi said with a laugh, "Your luck was good, you get to fight with an assassin. I did not even see the assassin's shadow. How was the martial art skill of the one you killed? What move did you use to kill him?"

Wei Xiaobao did not fight with any assassin at all, the Emperor's martial art skill was not weak, he simply could not speak thoughtlessly. A bright idea suddenly occurred, he recalled the fight between Feng Jizhong and Bai Hanfeng at the Bai family residence on the Willow Tree Lane the other day; he said, "It was dark, I only entangled him blindly. Suddenly his left leg swept across to the right, his right arm swept across to

the left ..." He was narrating and giving demonstration at the same time.

Kangxi clapped his hands, "Exactly right, exactly right! It's exactly this move!" he said.

Wei Xiaobao was startled; "Your Majesty," he asked, "Do you know this move?"

Kangxi laughed and said, "Do you know the name of this move?"

Wei Xiaobao knew it was called the ‘sweeping away a thousand army’, but he said, "Your servant does not know."

Kangxi laughed and said, "Let me tell you, so you'll know: this move is called the ‘sweeping away a thousand army’!"

Wei Xiaobao was very amazed, he said, "This name is very pleasant to the ears!" He was startled not because of the name, but because unexpectedly Kangxi also knew.

Kangxi said, "When he attacked you using this move, how did you deal with it?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "For a split second I panicked, I was unable to deal with it instantly, suddenly I recalled when you and I were having martial art competition, I remember you used an extremely clever move when you flung me down from the top of your head. I think you said that it was Wu Dang Pai's martial art, 'Immortal Crane Combing its Plume'."

Kangxi was delighted, he called out, "You used my martial art to break his move ‘sweeping away a thousand army’?"

"Exactly," Wei Xiaobao replied, "My martial art training is actually not too superior, fortunately the two of us have had martial art competition, we have fought a lot, so I remember more than half of the techniques you used. I remember how you attacked, how you parried ..."

"Right, right," Kangxi said, "This is 'Purple Cloud Hand' and 'Snapping Plum Flower Hand'."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Since I am licking his boot, I might as well go all out!" He said, "I then copied your style, I hastily grabbed his hand, and I did grab it, it's just that my strength was not enough, plus my position was not too accurate, he shook his left hand forcefully and thus managed to free himself."

"What a pity, what a pity," Kangxi said, "Let me teach you: you ought to grab here, in between the Hui Zong and Wai Guan [lit. reservoir assembly and outer pass, respectively] acupoints. No matter what, he wouldn't be able to shake himself free." While saying that, he grabbed the acupoints on Wei Xiaobao's wrist.

Wei Xiaobao struggled as hard as he could, but as expected, he was unable to struggle free. He said, "If you taught me earlier, the following dangerous situation would not have happened."

Kangxi let go of his hand, he asked with a laugh, "What happened next?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "As soon as he was free, he circled around behind me, and struck my back with both of his palms ..."

"High mountain flowing water!" Kangxi called out.

"So this move is called 'high mountain flowing water'?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "At that time I was so afraid I might be completely routed by him, in my desperation I used another one of your moves."

"You are useless!" Kangxi said with a laugh, "How come when you fight with others you did not use the move your Shifu taught you, but always use my moves instead?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "During training, the moves taught by Shifu

are clear and logical, but when one is in a life and death fight, how would one know which move will be effective? On the other hand, those moves of yours just jumped out from the bottom my heart. Your Majesty, at that time the edge of his palms had already hit my back, I was already scared out of my wits, how could I think about which move to use? Borrowing the momentum, I threw myself forward, then I turned around from the right side."

"Very good!" Kangxi said, "That is the 'circling wind step'!"

"Is that right?" Wei Xiaobao said, "As soon as I evaded his attack, I seized the opportunity to draw my dagger and stabbed him backhandedly with the blade, while crying out, 'Xiao Guizi, do you surrender now?'"

Kangxi laughed heartily. "Why did you call him 'Xiao Guizi'?" he asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Your servant was desperate, I don’t know what came into me, unexpectedly it was your technique that I remembered completely. The backhand stab was originally your backhand palm strike, when it hit my back and you called out, 'Xiao Guizi, do you surrender now?’. Without thinking I used that technique, while my mouth also called out. He grunted; without having enough time to call ‘surrender’, he died right away.”

Kangxi laughed. “Wonderful, wonderful!” he said, “My backhand palm strike is called ‘lone cloud coming out of mountain peak’. I did not think that you changed it into a sword move and with one strike you succeeded.” After starting martial art training, Kangxi had fought only with Wei Xiaobao, he had never had the satisfaction on being in a seriously desperate fight against an enemy. And now hearing that Wei Xiaobao had killed an enemy with his own hand, with the technique that he learned entirely from him, Kangxi was very happy and excited. He thought that if he personally went into action, he would be

ten times more brilliant than Wei Xiaobao. He said, “Those assassins’ guts were not small, but their martial art skill is sloppy and ordinary.”

“Your Majesty,” Wei Xiaobao said, “The assassins’ martial art skill is not that bad, there are several Imperial Bodyguards in our Palace who suffer injury in their hands. On the whole it was Xiao Guizi’s good luck that he had once served Your Majesty practicing martial art for so long that I managed to steal your three moves two styles. Otherwise, Your Majesty, today you would have issued an imperial edict, comforting and aiding the bereaved family of loyal subject who died in the line of duty, little eunuch Xiao Guizi, by one thousand *taels* of fine silver.”

Kangxi laughed, “How can one thousand *taels* be enough?” he said, “At least ten thousand *taels*.” The two of them burst into loud laughter together.

“Xiao Guizi,” Kangxi said, “Do you know who are these assassins?”

“I don’t know,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Your Majesty recognizes their martial art style, most likely you already have a guess.”

“At first I still cannot ascertain,” Kangxi said, “But your demonstration just now has added another layer of proof.” He clapped his hands, ordering the eunuch on duty at the Upper Study Room to summon Songgotu and Dolong, two people.

Those two have been waiting outside the Study Room, as soon as they were summoned by the Emperor, they came in and kowtowed.

Dolong was a military officer of the Manchurian’s Plain White Banner, during the invasion inland he had established not a few of outstanding military service, his martial art ability was also very profound, but all along he was pushed aside by Oboi, so he was very dissatisfied with his position in the officialdom. It was only after Oboi’s demise recently that Kangxi promoted him to

be the Imperial Bodyguards Chief, in charge of protecting the Qian Qing Gate[11], Zhonghe Palace, Taihe Palace[12], and other living quarters within the Palace. There were altogether six Imperial Bodyguard Chiefs inside the Palace, two from each banner: Plain Yellow, Plain White, and Bordered Yellow. But the ones with real power were the Imperial Bodyguard Chief and Deputy Chief in charge of the imperial living quarters. Dolong was newly appointed to this key job, suddenly assassins appeared in the Palace. He did not sleep the entire night, his heart was weighed down with anxiety, he did not know whether the Emperor and the Empress Dowager would place the blame on him.

Seeing his bloodshot eyes, Kangxi asked, “Have you interrogated clearly the captured assassins?”

Dolong said, “Reporting to Your Majesty: altogether there are three revolting thieves that are captured alive. Your servant has interrogated them separately. At first they rigidly refused to speak, afterwards they could not endure the torture and confessed. As expected … as expected they are Ping Xi Wang … Ping Xi Wang Wu Sangui’s subordinates.”

Kangxi nodded. “Hmm,” he said.

Dolong continued, “The weapons those revolting thieves left behind have the inscription ‘Ping Xi Wang Palace’ engraved on them. On the undergarments of the killed revolting thieves, there are also the markings of Ping Xi Wang. We have conclusive proof that the revolting thieves who came to invade and harass the Palace last night were Wu Sangui’s subordinates. Even if Wu Sangui did not personally send them, he … he simply cannot escape the responsibility.”

Kangxi asked Songgotu, “Have you also investigated clearly?”

Songgotu said, “Your servant has examined the revolting thieves’ weapons and undergarments. Dolong *Zongguan* has

recorded the revolting thieves' confession; that is indeed their confession."

"Go get those weapons and undergarments, I want to see," Kangxi said.

"Yes," Dolong complied. He knew that although the Emperor was young, he was very astute, plus this matter carried great responsibility, hence he had already prepared various exhibit packages, which he had his trusted aides, the Imperial Bodyguards, to carry as they waited outside the Upper Study Room. He stepped out and returned immediately; untying the cloth wrapper, he put everything on the table, then immediately took several steps back. The Manchurian Qing had fought hundreds of battles all over China, from the founding Emperor to the current one, all practiced martial art, and thus did not avoid weapons. However, inside the Study Room, for a government official to expose any weapon in front of the Emperor was still a taboo. Dolong was simply being careful; hence the reason he withdrew first.

Kangxi stepped forward, he picked up the sabers and swords and looked at them closely. He saw the inscription 'Regional Commander Office of Shanhai Pass of The Great Ming' on the saber's hilt. He smiled slightly and said, "Trying to hide it makes it more conspicuous, no doubt something is not right. By deliberately lighting the fire to play trick, they actually raised other people's suspicion." Turning to Songgotu, he said, "If Wu Sangui was to send assassins to the Palace to rebel against his superior, he would have had deep plans and distant thoughts, his plan and preparation would be comprehensive, he knew such sabers and swords cannot be used, why would they want to carry weapons with inscriptions? How could they not know these sabers and swords could be lost in the Palace?"

"Yes, yes," Songgotu said, "Holiness has seen it clearly, your servant admires it extremely."

Kangxi turned toward Wei Xiaobao and asked, “Xiao Guizi, tell me, what moves did the revolting thief that you killed used?”

Wei Xiaobao replied, “He used the ‘sweeping away a thousand army’, and also 'high mountain flowing water' moves.”

Kangxi asked Dolong, “What kind of martial art are they?”

Although Dolong was a noble official of the Manchus, he had an extensive knowledge of various martial arts of different schools and sects; these ‘sweeping away a thousand army’ and 'high mountain flowing water' were not unfamiliar moves to him, he replied, “Reporting to Your Majesty: those are apparently former Ming’s Mu Palace of Yunnan’s martial art.”

Kangxi clapped his hands, “That’s right, that’s right,” he said, “Dolong, your knowledge is extensive.”

Dolong was elated by this favor from his superior, a thread of smile appeared on his face as he kneeled down and kowtowed. “Thank you for Your Majesty’s compliment,” he said.

“Think about it carefully,” Kangxi said, “If Wu Sangui sent people to the Palace to commit assassination, he could not have chosen the time when his son is in Beijing. Assassins can come at any time, why did he have to pick the time when his son is having an audience with the Emperor? This is my first suspicion. Wu Sangui is adept at military strategy, the way he handled affairs is thorough. Sending these revolting thieves to do his work, the number of people was small, their martial art skill was not high, he should know it would be hard to succeed, why bother? This matter is incompatible with Wu Sangui’s character. This is my second suspicion. Moreover, even if he sent people to assassinate me, what would his benefit be? Could it be that he wanted to raise a rebellion? If he wanted to rebel, why did he send his son to Beijing? Isn’t that the same as deliberately sending his son so that we can behead him? This is my third suspicion.”

When Wei Xiaobao listened to Fang Yi's explanation on how they were scheming on framing Wu Sangui, he felt that it was an excellent plan; however, as he listened to Kangxi's analysis, he now felt that the scheme had flaws everywhere. He could not help but was full of admiration, and repeatedly nodded his head.

Songgotu said, "Your Majesty is an enlightened sage, your wisdom is not within reach of your servants."

Kangxi continued, "Think about it again, if the assassins were not sent by Wu Sangui, but carried Ping Xi Wang Palace's weapons, what was their real intention? Naturally it was to frame him. Wu Sangui has helped out Great Qing to pacify the land under the heaven, his merit was really big, the number of people who hate him is indeed not small. In the end, who prompted these revolting thieves? You must investigate it well."

Songgotu and Dolong complied together. Dolong said, "Your Majesty is an enlightened sage. If Your Majesty did not give direction and straighten things out, your muddleheaded servant will fall into their trick, and unavoidably wronged good people."

Kangxi said, "Wronged good people? Hey, hey!"

Seeing the Emperor did not have further instruction, they kowtowed and took their leave.

"Xiao Guizi," Kangxi said, "Can you guess how do I know those two moves 'sweeping away a thousand army' and 'high mountain flowing water'?"

Wei Xiaobao's heart was thumping madly, he said, "I was wondering myself, how did Your Majesty know?"

Kangxi said, "Early in the morning today, I already summoned a lot of Imperial Bodyguards, I asked them about the fight with the assassins last night, trying to investigate the martial art the assassins used. There are unexpectedly some from the Mu Family of former Ming. Just think, for generations the Mu Family

ruled in Yunnan, after my Great Qing's dragon rose, we bestowed Yunnan to Wu Sangui, how could the Mu Family not angry? Much less the last of the Mu Family, Duke Mu Tianbo of Guizhou province, died under Wu Sangui's hands. I asked my men to demonstrate Mu Family's most formidable moves, among which were these two moves 'sweeping away a thousand army' and 'high mountain flowing water'."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Your Majesty truly able to prophecy with supernatural accuracy." But in his heart he was anxious, "I am hiding two women of the Mu Family in my room, I wonder if he knew about it."

Kangxi laughed and asked, "Xiao Guizi, do you want to be rich?"

Hearing the words 'to be rich', Wei Xiaobao's spirit was immediately aroused, his anxiety gone. With a giggle he said, "Your Majesty did not order me to get rich, I do not dare to get rich; Your Majesty ordered me to get rich, Xiao Guizi did not dare not to get rich."

"Alright," Kangxi said with a laugh, "I order you to get rich! Take these sabers and swords, and the undergarments taken from the assassins, along with the assassins' written confession, give everything to certain person, and then the great wealth will come to you."

Wei Xiaobao was stunned, but he immediately understood. "Wu Yingxiong!" he called out.

Kangxi laughed, "You are so smart," he said, "Just go!"

Wei Xiaobao said, "This kid Wu Yingxiong's luck is really good this time, his entire family's lives has been rewarded by Your Majesty."

"What are you going to say to him?" Kangxi asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "I'll say: The one surnamed Wu, our

Majesty's insight spans ten thousand *li*, whatever you, father and son, did in Yunnan, not a single one is missed by His Majesty. You did not revolt, His Majesty can see it clearly, but if, hey hey, you are having 'three hearts and two intentions', 'two-faced, three knives' [both idioms mean 'double-cross/double dealing and back stabbing'], His Majesty will also see it clearly. Damn it, you, father and son, better be nice to me."

Kangxi burst out in laughter, he said, "You are very clever; although you did not go to school, your words are coarse and vulgar, in the end you still capture my intention. Damn it, you, father and son, better be nice to me. Ha ha ha ha …"

Hearing the Emperor unexpectedly learned to say 'damn it', Wei Xiaobao could not refrain his heart from blooming. He also burst out in laughter. Taking the sabers, swords, and other objects, he left the Study Room and returned to his own room.

He had just about to unlock the door when he felt a stabbing pain on his back, his head spun and he felt he was about to vomit. Forcing himself to unlock the door, he sat on a chair, and continuously gasping for breath.

Mu Jianping said, "You … you are not feeling well?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Seeing your 'bashful flower obstructing the moon' appearance, I am feeling well already."

Mu Jianping laughed and said, "My *Shijie* is the one with 'bashful flower obstructing the moon' appearance, I have a little turtle on my face, I am so ugly, extremely ugly."

Hearing she was bantering with him, Wei Xiaobao's mood brightened immediately; he laughed and said, "How can there be any little turtle on your face? Ah, I know, Good *Meizi*, your face is bright and smooth, it is fair and clear, almost like a mirror, therefore, it may have a little turtle on it."

Mu Jianping was puzzled. "How come?" she asked.

“Who are you sleeping with?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Your face is like a mirror, so it reflected that person’s appearance. Naturally there will be a little turtle on your face.”

“Pei!” Fang Yi spat, “Just come over and look, then there will be a little turtle on Xiao Junzhu’s face.”

“If I come over and look,” Wei Xiaobao said, “A handsome and vigorous big master will appear on Good *Meizi*’s face.”

Fang and Mu, two women laughed. Fang Yi said, “Little turtle big master, which one is the big master?”

The three of them laughed together. “Hey,” Fang Yi said, “We must escape from the Palace, you need to think of a way.”

These days wherever he went, Wei Xiaobao was always flattered by other people, but as soon as he returned to his own room, he would be extremely lonely and bored. Now that he suddenly had Fang and Mu, two young women to accompany him, although there was the danger that someone else might find out any minute, in all honesty he hated to have them leave him; thereupon he said, “We need to think about it slowly, you are both injured, as soon as you take a step out of the door, you might be caught instantly.”

Fang Yi sighed gently, she asked, “Among our people who entered the Palace last night, I wonder how many have died, and how many were captured? Would you possibly know the names of the people who ran into misfortune?”

Wei Xiaobao shook his head, “I don’t know,” he said, “But since you are concerned, I may be able to find out for you.”

“Thank you very much,” Fang Yi said in a low voice. Ever since he met her, Wei Xiaobao had never heard her speaking politely like this, he was very astonished in his heart.

Mu Jianping said, “Especially we wanted to ask whether a certain man surnamed Liu was able to escape safely or not.”

“Surnamed Liu?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “What’s his name?”

“He is our Liu *Shige* [martial (older) brother],” Mu Jianping replied, “He is called Liu Yizhou. He … he is my *Shijie*’s sweetheart, so … so …” Suddenly she squealed, since Fang Yi had tickled her armpit, she did not want her to continue.

“Ah!” Wei Xiaobao exclaimed, “Liu Yizhou, hmm, this … this might be bad.”

Fang Yi was unable to restrain her emotions; she asked hastily, “What is it?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Isn’t he a tall, fair-complexion, approximately twenty some years, handsome young man? This man’s martial art skill is really good, is he the one?” Naturally he did not know what kind of person Liu Yizhou was, but thinking that this man was Fang Yi’s sweetheart, he must be a handsome young man. And since he was their older martial brother, he could not be wrong if he said the man’s martial art was really high.

Sure enough, Mu Jianping said, “That’s right, that’s right, it is he. Fang *Shijie* said that when she was wounded last night, she saw Liu *Shige* was being overthrown by three Imperial Bodyguards, one Imperial Bodyguard was holding him down, most likely he was captured. I wonder what happened to him?"

"Ay," Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, "Turns out this Liu *Shifu* is Miss Fang's sweetheart ..." He did not stop shaking his head and heaving sighs.

Fang Yi showed concern on her face. "Gui *Dage*," she said, "What happened to that Liu ... Liu *Shige*?"

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "Stinky girl, you have never talked amiably with me, as soon as mentioning your Liu *Shige*, you call me Gui *Dage*. I'd better scare her a bit." He heaved a deep sigh again and shook his head as he said, "What a pity, what a pity!"

Fang Yi was alarmed. "What happened?" she asked, "Is he ... is he ... is he injured, or ... or is he dead?"

Wei Xiaobao burst into loud laughter; he said, "*Laozi* has never seen any Liu Yizhou or Liu Liangpi[13], how would I know if he is dead or still alive? You call me 'Good husband' three times, I'll find out for you."

When Fang Yi saw him shaking his head, heaving a sigh and repeatedly saying 'What a pity' earlier, she thought that the chance of Liu Yizhou being unfortunate was greater than the chance of him being fortunate. Hearing what Wei Xiaobao suddenly said, she was delighted in her heart, but with her mouth she spat and said, "You never said anything serious. Are you telling the truth, or was it a lie?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "If this Liu Yizhou fell into my hands, humph, humph, I will tie him up first, and give him a good flogging, until his butts turned into four pieces. I'll ask him what graceful words, flowery speech he used to win my wife's heart. Afterwards I'll raise my blade and chop down, whoosh ..."

"You are going to kill him?" Mu Jianping asked.

"No," Wei Xiaobao said, "I will cut off his balls, turning him into a eunuch."

Mu Jianping did not understand what he was saying. But Fang Yi understood, her face turned deep as she cursed, "Little smart-aleck, always talks rubbish!"

"Most likely your Liu *Shige* has been captured," Wei Xiaobao said, "Whether I want him to be eunuch or not, as soon as I, Gui Gong-gong, say the word, not a few people will be willing to listen. Miss Fang, are you or are you not going to ask me to help?"

Fang Yi's face blushed deep red again, she mumbled intelligibly. Mu Jianping said, "Gui *Dage*, if you are willing to

help, you need not wait for others to ask you, then you are a true chivalrous hero."

Wei Xiaobao waved his hand and said, "Wrong, wrong! I like it the most when people are asking me. The more intimate they call me 'Good Husband', 'Dear Husband', the more spirited I will do things to help them."

After hesitating for half a day, Fang Yi said, "Gui *Dage*, Good *Dage*, I am asking you to help."

With a straight face Wei Xiaobao said, "Must be 'Husband'!"

"You are wrong here," Mu Jianping said, "My *Shijie* is going to marry Liu *Shige*, Liu *Shige* is her husband, how can she call you 'husband'?"

"That won't do," Wei Xiaobao said, "If she marries Liu Yizhou, *laozi* will drink vinegar, I will be seriously jealous."

"Liu *Shige* is a very good man," Mu Jianping said.

"The better he is, the more I will drink vinegar," Wei Xiaobao said, "Aiyo! It's so sour, it's so sour! I drank too much vinegar, ha ha ha ha ...!" Amidst his laughter, he picked up the bundle, went out of the room, and locked the door behind him. And then bringing along four eunuch attendants, he rode a horse to West Chang'an Street, where Wu Yingxiong stayed during his visit to Beijing.

On the horseback, his right hand did not stop punching the air while he yelled, "Bang bang bang, bang bang bang!" His attendants did not understand his meaning, and how could they know that this time Gui Gong-gong had received an imperial edict to get rich? Naturally the 'bang, bang, bang' was the sound of knocking onto Yunnan's bamboo shoulder pole [See note **Error! Bookmark not defined.**, Chapter 10].

Hearing about the arrival of the Emperor's personal envoy, Wu Yingxiong hurriedly went out to kowtow and greet, and then he

took Wei Xiaobao to the main hall.

Wei Xiaobao said, "His Majesty ordered me to take these stuffs to show to you. *Xiao Wangye*, do you have big guts or not?"

Wu Yingxiong said, "Humble officer's guts is the smallest, I am easily terrified."

Wei Xiaobao was startled, and then he laughed and said, "You are easily frightened? What about staging a rebellion? You must be very bold!"

Wu Yingxiong said, "Humble officer does not understand Gong-gong too clearly, please explain it to me." At Prince Kang's mansion the previous night, he referred to himself as 'zaixia', today Wei Xiaobao came on imperial orders, and he saw how arrogant he was, he had a faint feeling that things did not look too good; thereupon he repeatedly called himself 'humble officer'.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Altogether, how many assassins did you send to the Palace last night? His Majesty sent me here to ask."

Wu Yingxiong had heard some news about some assassins creating disturbance in the Palace the previous night; hearing Wei Xiaobao suddenly said those words, his shock was indeed not small. Immediately he fell down on his knees and kowtowed again and again toward the courtyard, saying, "Your Majesty treats your humble servants, father and son, with kindness as heavy as the mountain, even if your humble servants, father and son, became oxen or horses, we still cannot repay Your Majesty's grace. Your humble servants, Wu Sangui, Wu Yingxiong, father and son, are willing to give up our lives for Your Majesty, we have never been double-minded."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Stand up, stand up, it won't be too late to kowtow later. *Xiao Wangye*, let me show you something." While saying that, he untied the cloth wrapper and

spread the contents on the table.

Wu Yingxiong stood up and looked at the weapons and clothes in the bundle; he could not restrain his hands from trembling, as with a trembling voice he said, "This ... this ... this ..." Picking up the written confession, he read it clearly that the assassins were sent by Ping Xi Wang Wu Sangui, they entered the Palace to commit assassination, they were determined to kill the Tatars Emperor, and set up Wu Sangui as their master, and so on and so forth.

Despite his ability to adapt to the circumstances and his extensive knowledge, Wu Yingxiong could not help but was scared out of his wits. His knees buckled and he kneeled down again, this time in front of Wei Xiaobao. He said, “Gui … Gong … Gong … Gong, this … this is not true, humble officers, father and son, are being … framed by crafty scoundrels. I beseech Gong-gong to present a memorial to the Holiness, to … to … make clear …”

Wei Xiaobao said, “These weapons belonged to the revolting thieves who entered the Palace, who conspired against the law, who committed treason and heresy. The weapons actually bear the insignia of your precious palace.”

Wu Yingxiong said, “Humble officers, father and son, have a lot of personal enemies; this must be our enemies’ sinister plot.”

Wei Xiaobao was doubtful. “What you said has a thirty percent truth in it, but I don’t know if His Majesty would believe it or not.”

Wu Yingxiong said, “Gong-gong’s great kindness and great favor are clearly understood by humble officers, father and son. Humble officers, father and son’s bodies, family and lives are all due to Gong-gong’s graciousness.”

“*Xiao Wangye*,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Stand up. Last night you

sent me some gifts first, presumably you have anticipated early on that this matter would happen. Hey, hey, hey, hey.”

Actually, Wu Yingxiong was about to stand up, but hearing this serious accusation, he hastily kneeled down again and said, “As long as Gong-gong explains everything clearly to His Majesty on behalf of humble officers, father and son, His Majesty is an enlightened sage, he will definitely believe Gong-gong.”

“This matter is already made public,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Songgotu, Suo *Daren*, and Imperial Bodyguard Chief Dolong, Duo *Daren*, have already seen His Majesty to report the assassins’ written confession. You know, a matter as big as rebellion, who would have a gargantuan guts and try to hush it off? Explaining everything clearly to His Majesty on your behalf is not impossible. I have an excellent idea, although not extremely certain, most likely I can clear up the criminal charge against the two of you, father and son. It's just that it will be troublesome."

Wu Yingxiong was delighted, "We are relying on Gong-gong's help," he said.

"Please stand up, let's talk," Wei Xiaobao said. Wu Yingxiong stood up, but still repeatedly bowed with cupped fist.

"You really did not send those assassins?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Absolutely not!" Wu Yingxiong replied, "How can humble officer do something so heinous and unpardonable, a crime deserving ten thousand deaths?"

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "I am considering you as a friend, so I believe you this time. If the future investigation proves that the assassins were sent by you, I will be buried alive, but I will make sure your whole family unto the third generation will accompany me."

"Gong-gong, rest assured," Wu Yingxiong said, "Please set your hundred and twenty hearts at ease, there is absolutely no

such thing."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Then in your opinion, who sent these assassins?"

Wu Yingxiong hesitatingly said, "Humble officers, father and son, indeed have a lot of enemies, it is really hard to determine which one in this short moment."

Wei Xiaobao said, "You want me to clear up the charges against you in front of His Majesty, you must identify an enemy to take the responsibility, only then will His Majesty believe."

"Yes, yes," Wu Yingxiong said, "For the Great Qing to subdue the land under heaven, the number of rebels my father exterminated is truly not just a few. The remnants of these rebel groups extremely hate my father; such as that rebel Li Chuang[14], followers of former Ming's King Tang, King Gui, and the remnants of Mu Family of Yunnan. They all harbor a grudge against my father, they would do anything to rebel against the authority."

Wei Xiaobao nodded; he said, "Those remnants of rebel Li Chuang, Mu Family, and so on, what kind of martial art do they have? Show me some moves, I will demonstrate it in front of His Majesty, I'll say that I saw it with my own eyes last night, I'll say that these are the moves that the assassins used. Genuine goods at fair prices, guaranteed it won't be wrong."

Wu Yingxiong was delighted, he hurriedly said, "Gong-gong's idea is very clever. Humble officer only know one school of martial art, my understanding is truly limited, I must ask my subordinate to help me. Gong-gong, please sit down for a moment, humble officer will be back very soon." Finished speaking, he bowed and cupped his fist again, then hurriedly went in.

A moment later, he brought someone into the hall, it was the

leader of his attendants, Yang Yizhi, whom Wei Xiaobao helped to win seven hundred *taels* the previous night. Yang Yizhi stepped forward to pay his respect to Wei Xiaobao; his face showed deep anxiety, apparently Wu Yingxiong had told him the reason of Wei Xiaobao's visit.

"Yang *Dage*," Wei Xiaobao said, "No need to worry, during the martial art practice at Prince Kang's mansion last night, you have created quite a stir, many civil and military ministers witnessed it with their own eyes, they cannot possibly say that you entered the Palace to commit murder. I can also bear witness on your behalf."

"Yes, yes! Thank you very much Gong-gong," Yang Yizhi said, "But I am afraid the crafty scoundrel will frame us up, they could say that Heir Apparent took us to Kang *Wangye*'s Palace as an alibi, to have various civil and military ministers witnessed it with their own eyes, while surreptitiously sent another group of people to commit treason and heresy."

Wei Xiaobao nodded, "We can't not guard against people saying that," he said.

Yang Yizhi said, "Heir Apparent said that Gong-gong is willing to uphold justice, to clear up the charges against us in front of His Majesty, truly you are out great benefactor. Ping Xi Wang's enemies are indeed numerous, each one's martial art is very mixed, only Mu Palace's martial art style is unique, very easy to recognize."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Um, what a pity we can’t find Mu Palace’s people, otherwise we can have him to demonstrate several moves and styles that we can see.’

Yang Yizhi said, “Mu Family Fist and Mu Family Sword have been around in Yunnan for a long time, *Xiaoren* also remembers some. Let me demonstrate some moves, I am asking Gong-gong to give directions. The assassins entered the Palace

carrying sabers and swords, how about *Xiaoren* demonstrate the ‘circling wind sword’?”

Wei Xiaobao happily said, “So you know Mu Family martial art, nothing better than that. I know nothing about sword technique, I won’t be able to learn it in a short period of time. I’d better learn from you the Mu Family Fist.”

“I do not dare,” Yang Yizhi replied, “Gong-gong has the power to capture Oboi, your name became famous over the four seas, your fist and kick skill must be very high, *Xiaoren* cannot reach that level, Gong-gong, please advice.” Finished speaking, he moved to the middle of the hall, and started demonstrating each move and each style slowly.

This particular Mu Family Fist was handed down from Mu Ying’s hands, generation to generation for over three hundred years. The successive generations were all martial art masters who, in turn, taught it to their disciples. It could be regarded as ‘thousand-time forged, hundred-time refined’ skill, its practitioners in Yunnan was indeed very numerous. Although Yang Yizhi was by no means an expert in this fist technique, his own martial art skill was very high, his knowledge extensive, as he demonstrated move by move, his bearing was very dignified, his style was exquisite.

Seeing the move ‘sweeping away a thousand army’, Wei Xiaobao praised, "This move is fabulous!" Afterwards he also saw the 'high mountain flowing water', and praised again, "This move is also amazing!" After Yang Yizhi finished demonstrating the Mu Family Fist set, Wei Xiaobao said, "Very good, very good! Yang *Dage*, your martial art is indeed very profound. Of those martial art masters at the Prince Kang's mansion, ten of them against you alone, they still are not your match. In this short period of time, I won't be able to learn too much, perhaps I can learn only one or two moves that I can demonstrate in front of His Majesty. When His Majesty will summon martial art

experts within the Palace to identify, do you think they can recognize the origin of this martial art?" While saying that, he moved his hands and feet in imitation of the ‘sweeping away a thousand army’ and 'high mountain flowing water' styles.

Yang Yizhi happily said, "Gong-gong's comprehension of the ‘sweeping away a thousand army’ and 'high mountain flowing water' is very deep, when those experts see, they will know immediately that it is Mu Family Fist technique. Gong-gong has an outstanding intelligence, you can do it just by looking at it one time. Our Wu Family will be saved."

Wu Yingxiong repeatedly bowed with cupped fist and said, "Hundreds of Wu Family members depend on Gong-gong's help to save our lives."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "There are gold and silver mountains in Wu Sangui's household, I don't need to negotiate the price with him." Immediately he bowed to return the propriety and said, "We all are good friends. *Xiao Wangye*, why do you keep talking about benevolence and saving your lives, and thus considering me as an outsider? Besides, though I will try my best, I don't know whether it will be effective."

"Yes, yes!" Wu Yingxiong repeatedly said.

Wei Xiaobao rewrapped the bundle and tucked it on his side, he thought, "There's no hurry for me to give this bundle to him." Suddenly he remembered something; he said, "*Xiao Wangye*, His Majesty ordered me to ask you something: there is a government official from Yunnan who is coming to Beijing, a certain Lu Yifeng; do you know such person?"

Wu Yingxiong was startled; he thought, "Lu Yifeng is just a petty officer [orig. 'mung bean and sesame seed petty officer'] who came to Beijing for an audience, but has not seen the Emperor yet, how did His Majesty know?" He said, "Lu Yifeng is a newly appointed county magistrate of Yunnan's Qujing

prefecture, presently he is in Beijing, waiting to kowtow to His Holiness."

Wei Xiaobao said, "His Majesty ordered me to ask you: a few days ago that Lu Yifeng bullied common people in a restaurant, he tolerated his wicked servants beating people, I wonder if his temperament has improved recently?"

To get Wu Sangui appointed him as the county magistrate of Qujing prefecture, Lu Yifeng had spent more than forty thousand *taels* in bribe, from which Wu Yingxiong had drawn his share of three thousand *taels*. Hearing what Wei Xiaobao said, he was shocked and busily said, "Humble officer will definitely give him a good lesson." Turning his head to Yang Yizhi he said, "Go get that Lu Yifeng, give him fifty flogging first before we speak further." To Wei Xiaobao he said, "Gong-gong, please report to His Majesty: humble officer Wu Sangui failed to understand people and has recommended unsuitable candidate, we ask His Majesty not to blame us. This Lu Yifeng will be deposed immediately, and forever will not be employed anymore; we ask that the Official of the Ministry of Appointments entrusts another able person."

“Does he need to be punished that heavily?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Wu Yingxiong said, “This servant Lu Yifeng is audacious, he dared to usurp higher authority, his crime must not be tolerated indeed. Yizhi, beat him heavily for me.”

“Yes!” Yang Yizhi replied.

Wei Xiaobao mused, “I am afraid the life of this official surnamed Lu cannot be guaranteed.” He said, “*Xiongdi* is going to return to the Palace to see His Majesty, it would be best if I can demonstrate these two moves ‘sweeping away a thousand army’ and 'high mountain flowing water' as close to the original as possible.” Finished speaking, he took his leave and headed

toward the door.

Wu Yingxiong took out a large pouch from his sleeve pocket, which he presented with both hands and said, “Gui Gong-gong, your great kindness and great favor are not easy to repay, but I must show a little respect to Dolong *Zongguan*, Suo *Daren*, as well as numerous Imperial Bodyguards. Here is a tiny bit of my token of appreciation, I will have to bother Gui Gong-gong to pass it on to them on behalf of humble officer. If His Majesty asked, everybody will help put some good words for us, then the unjust treatment of the humble officers, father and son, will be wiped out.”

Wei Xiaobao received the gift, he said with a laugh, “You want me to do a favor for you? This errand is not difficult to do.” He had been living in the Palace for more than a year, and had learned enough of court eunuch’s lingo and Beijing accent, so that not even half a part of Yangzhou accent was left. If right now he pretended to be Xiao Guizi, perhaps the blind Hai Laogong would not easily discover his masquerade.

Wu Yingxiong and Yang Yizhi respectfully sent him off outside the mansion’s gate. On the sedan chair, Wei Xiaobao opened the pouch to take a look; unexpectedly it was banknotes worth a hundred thousand *taels*. “His granny,” he thought, “*Laozi* will take half as my share first,” and took fifty thousand *taels* and put it into his pocket. The remaining fifty thousand *taels* he returned to the pouch.

Wei Xiaobao went to the Upper Study Room first to see Kangxi, reporting that the mission had been accomplished, that Wu Yingxiong had been informed that the Emperor was an enlightened sage, that the injustice against father and son had been clarified, and that they were grateful beyond description.

Kangxi laughed and said, “We have given him a big scare this time.”

Wei Xiaobao also laughed, “Only scared him till he piss in his pants,” he said, “Your servant has repeatedly warned him that this kind of matter will most likely happen again in the future, I told him to pass on to Wu Sangui that to repay your kindness, he has to be completely loyal and devoted in rendering his service to Your Majesty.” Kangxi repeatedly nodded.

Wei Xiaobao continued, “After I thought that he is scared enough, I told him that the Emperor is able to see ten thousand *li*, that he examined the assassins’ martial art and found out that it belonged to the Mu Family rebel thieves. That Wu Yingxiong was startled but also happy, from his buttocks all the way to his eyes he was all smile, while did not stop praising Your Majesty’s sage-like brilliance.” Kangxi smile slightly.

From his pocket Wei Xiaobao took out a pouch and said, “He was exceedingly grateful that he took a lot of banknotes, fifty thousand *taels* altogether, saying that ten thousand *taels* is for me, the other forty thousand *taels* is to be distributed to the Imperial Bodyguards who have exerted themselves last night. Your Majesty, look, we are indeed getting rich.”

Those banknotes were of five-hundred-*tael* denomination, so it was a thick pack of one hundred notes. Kangxi laughed and said, “You are just a little kid, you won’t spend the entire ten thousand *taels* in your lifetime. The rest of the money you may distribute to the Imperial Bodyguards.”

Wei Xiaobao mused, “Although His Majesty is an enlightened sage, there is no way he would know that I, Wei Xiaobao, still have several hundred thousand *taels* at home.” He said, “Your Majesty, I am with you, what else I am lacking? Why would I need this money? Your servant will serve you with devotion for the rest of my life, you are going to look after me. It would be better for all this fifty thousand *taels* to be distributed to the Imperial Bodyguards. I will tell them that it’s a reward from Your Majesty, why should we let Wu Yingxiong buy the hearts of

the people?” At first Kangxi did not want to pretend he was giving rewards while in fact he was not, but hearing the words ‘buy the hearts of the people’, he could not help but was moved.

Seeing Kangxi was hesitating without saying anything, Wei Xiaobao added, “Your Majesty, Wu Sangui sent his son to Beijing. The amount of gold and money he brings is indeed not small, as soon as he sees someone, he would give gifts, not necessarily with good intentions. From the ancient of times, all the gold, silver and jewels of the common people everywhere in your realm actually belong to you, the Emperor. But this old fellow Wu Sangui is extremely perverse, he treats Yunnan as his Wu family’s own.”

Kangxi nodded and said, “You are right. You may say that this monetary reward is from me.”

From the Upper Study Room, Wei Xiaobao went to the Imperial Bodyguards compound. To the Imperial Bodyguards Chief, Dolong he said, “Duo *Zongguan*, His Majesty instructed that those Imperial Bodyguards who set up meritorious deed in protecting the Palace last night are to be rewarded fifty thousand *taels* of silver.” Dolong was ecstatic, he quickly kneeled down to express his thanks for the reward. Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Right now His Majesty is very happy, why don’t you go yourself and say thanks?” While saying that, he handed the fifty thousand *taels* banknotes to him.

Dolong followed Wei Xiaobao back to the Upper Study Room; he kneeled down and kowtowed to Kangxi and said, “Your Majesty bestowed the money, your servant Dolong and the Imperial Bodyguards thank you for the reward.” Kangxi laughed and nodded his head.

Wei Xiaobao said, “His Majesty instructed: you must distribute these fifty thousand *taels* to those who have meritorious deed

in killing the thieves, those who summoned up courage and determination and thus were wounded are to have a little bit more."

"Yes, yes," Dolong said, "Your servant will obey the Emperor's decree."

Kangxi thought, "Not only is Xiao Guizi loyal, he is not greedy either, it's really hard to come by. Unexpectedly he really gives away all fifty thousand *taels* to the Imperial Bodyguards, without taking a single *qian* for himself."

Wei Xiaobao and Dolong withdrew together. Dolong pulled a stack of banknotes, ten thousand *taels* worth, and said with a laugh, "Gui Gong-gong, just consider this the Imperial Bodyguards' filial piety, please take it and hand it over to the little Gong-gongs."

"Aha, Duo *Zongguan*," Wei Xiaobao said, "By saying that, you do not consider me as a friend. In all my life, I, Xiao Guizi, most revere friends who are exceptionally skilful in martial arts. If His Majesty bestowed these fifty thousand *taels* to the civil officials, if I, Xiao Guizi, did not take ten thousand *taels*, I would at least take eight thousand. But since he bestowed it to you, Duo *Zongguan*, even if you share with me one *tael,* I can't take it. I consider you as my good friend, so it's only proper that you also consider me as your good friend."

Dolong laughed and said, "The Imperial Bodyguards brothers all say that among many Gong-gong with office duty in the Palace, Gui Gong-gong is the youngest, but reaching to friends the most, indeed it is a fully justified reputation."

"Duo *Zongguan*, I am asking you to investigate for me," Wei Xiaobao said, "See if among the rebel thieves that were captured last night there is a certain Liu Yizhou. If there is one, we may find out from him the ins and outs[15] of the rebel thieves."

“Yes, yes!” Dolong promised, “The rebel thieves naturally will give us false names. I will investigate carefully.”

Wei Xiaobao went back to his residence. As he arrived at the front door, he saw a little eunuch from the imperial kitchen was waiting by the pathway. The little eunuch came up to meet him and said in a low voice, “Gui Gong-gong, that Boss Qian is delivering another pig, this time it is called something like ‘bird’s nest ginseng pig’, he says he wants to show filial respect to Gong-gong. Right now he is waiting for Gong-gong’s arrival at the imperial kitchen.”

Wei Xiaobao frowned; he thought, “That Fu Ling Hua Diao pig [see end of Chapter 9, beginning of Chapter 10] has not been properly taken care of, and now he is sending another ‘bird’s nest ginseng pig’. You think here in the Palace is a pig pen?” But since that man had already come, he could not think of a way to send him away.

Arriving at the imperial kitchen, Wei Xiaobao saw Boss Qian’s beaming face as he said, “Gui Gong-gong, *Xiao Ren*’s Fu Ling Hua Diao pig has really done you unusually good, after Gui Gong-gong ate it, look, your spirit is clear and your *chi* bright, your complexion is ruddy. *Xiaoren* appreciates it that Gong-gong took care of it, so I send you a ‘bird’s nest ginseng pig’.” While saying that, he pointed toward a live pig by his side. This pig was covered in white hair; it looked very beautiful as it constantly moving in a circle inside the bamboo cage. Wei Xiaobao did not know what kind of trick Boss Qian was playing, so he only nodded.

Boss Qian came closer and held Wei Xiaobao’s hand as he said, “Tsk, tsk tsk! After eating the Fu Ling Hua Diao pork, Gui Gong-gong’s pulse is strong, it is substantially different from before.” Wei Xiaobao felt a piece of paper in his hand, but since there were too many people around the imperial kitchen, he felt it was inconvenience to ask.

Boss Qian said, “This bird’s nest ginseng pig’s feeding is not the same, please tell Gong-gong’s subordinates to feed distiller’s grain for ten days. Ten days later, *Xiaoren* will personally come over to prepare it and will have Gong-gong enjoy it.”

Wei Xiaobao knitted his brows and said, “That Fu Ling Hua Diao pork has raised my internal heat, it is unbearably uncomfortable. Whatever ginseng pork, bird’s nest pork, Boss Qian, you’d better enjoy it yourself, I don’t want to eat it.”

Boss Qian laughed heartily and said, “This is just *Xiaoren*’s way of showing a little bit of appreciation. Next time I won’t dare to bother Gong-gong anymore.” He then said several good wishes and took his leave.

Wei Xiaobao thought there must be some characters written on that piece of paper, but he could not recognize any character even if it was the size of a watermelon. He instructed the kitchen manager to take care of the pig well, and then returned to his residence alone, thinking, “This Boss Qian is really smart. The first time he concealed a living person inside a dead pig and carried it into the Palace. The second time, if he delivered another dead pig into the Palace, unavoidably he will draw suspicions; therefore, he delivered a live pig and have it fed in the imperial kitchen. There is no pattern here, even if someone was originally suspicious, the suspicion would have gone. That’s right, in using trick to scam people, not only I have to give it thorough thought in advance, subsequently, I also have to patch any hole.” He also thought, “I have no choice but to ask Xiao Junzhu to have a look at this note. Damn it, why didn’t he simply tell me what he wants? Why did he have to write a damn note?”

As he entered his room, Mu Jianping said, “Gui *Dage*, there was someone on the door, he was probably delivering the meal. Seeing the door was locked, he left without knocking.”

“How did you know he was delivering our meal?” Wei Xiaobao

asked, “Hey, you must be smelling the delicious aroma and were very hungry, weren’t you? Why didn’t you eat the cakes and the pastries?”

Mu Jianping giggled and said, “We are really impolite, we already ate long ago.”

Fang Yi said, “Gui … Gui *Dage*, have you …” Speaking to this point, she stammered slightly.

“I have not found out anything about your Liu *Shige*,” Wei Xiaobao said, “The Imperial Bodyguards in the Palace said that they did not capture anybody by the surnamed of Liu.”

“Thank you very much,” Fang Yi said in low voice, “I wonder if he has been killed by the Tatars. Besides, even if Liu *Shige* was captured, he would not say that his surname was Liu. We have agreed that he would pretend to have the surname of Xia. Wu Sangui’s son-in-law is surnamed Xia, Liu *Shige* could confess that that surnamed Xia man was his uncle.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Won’t that make you Wu Sangui’s relative?”

“He was only pretending,” Xiao Junzhu hastily said.

Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, “But even if Miss Fang wanted to be the wife of Wu Sangui’s grandnephew, she could not. Let’s say that your Liu *Shige* has escaped out of the Palace, outside he is thinking about you, inside the Palace you are thinking about him. For the rest of your lives you would think about him, he would think about you, a pair of passionate older brother and older sister won’t be able to see each other, wouldn’t it be hard to bear?”

Fang Yi’s face turned red as she said, “How can I live in the Palace for the rest of my life?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Once the young women entered the Palace, where can they see the day they can go out? A bashful

flower obstructing the moon elder sister like you, for example, as soon as I, Xiao Guizi, saw you, I want to take you as my wife. If the Emperor saw you, it's impossible if he did not bestow you the title *Huang Hou Niang-niang* [empress/imperial consort]. Miss Fang, I advise you to be the *Huang Hou Niang-niang*!"

Fang Yi anxiously said, "I don't want to talk too much to you. Everything you say always irritates me, you always tease me and make me worry."

Wei Xiaobao laughed. He handed over the note in his hand to Mu Jianping. "Xiao Junzhu," he said, "Can you read this note?"

Mu Jianping took the note and read, "Gaosheng Teahouse, Legend of Heroic Deeds. What is this?"

Wei Xiaobao understood immediately, "Tian Di Hui people want to see me, they ask me to go to the teahouse to meet them." He laughed and said, "It's useless for you to be the Mu Family's later generation, you don't even know the 'Legend of Heroic Deeds'?"

"Of course I know the Legend of Heroic Deeds," Mu Jianping said, "That is the story of *Taizu Huangdi*'s dragon rose as he founded the country."

Wei Xiaobao said, "There is a chapter called 'Mu Wangye Subdued Yunnan with Three Arrows, Gui Gong-gong embraces beautiful women with his pair of hands', have you heard about it?"

Mu Jianping spat and said, "Our Qian Ning[16] *Wangyeye* pacified Yunnan, naturally it is recorded in the Legend of Heroic Deeds, but where did the Gui Gong-gong's pair of hands … pair of hands come from?"

With a straight face Wei Xiaobao said, "Are you saying that there is no chapter about 'Gui Gong-gong embraces beautiful

women with his pair of hands'?"

"Of course not," Mu Jianping said, "You are making it up."

"Let's have a bet," Wei Xiaobao said, "What if there is? What if there is not?"

"I have heard the Legend of Heroic Deeds until I am very familiar with the stories," Mu Jianping said, "I am sure there is not. You can bet anything. Fang *Shijie*, there is no such thing as the story he mentioned, is there?"

Fang Yi had not answered, Wei Xiaobao already leaped into the bed and crawled into the quilt, with shoes and all, and then he lay down in between the two women. With his left hand he embraced Fang Yi's neck, with his right hand he embraced Mu Jianping's waist. He said, "I say, there is!"

"Ah!" Fang Yi and Mu Jianping cried out in alarm, but it was too late for them to evade, Wei Xiaobao had already held them firmly in his arms. Mu Jianping stretched out her right hand and pushed him as hard as she could. Wei Xiaobao seized this opportunity to lean sideways and stole a kiss on Fang Yi's mouth. "Smells good!" he praised.

Fang Yi was about to struggle, but as soon as she moved ever so slightly, she felt a shot of severe pain from the wound on the pit of her stomach and her broken rib. With the back of her left hand she slapped Wei Xiaobao's face. Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Murder of your own husband! Murder of your own husband!" Rolling down, he jumped out of the quilt, with Mu Jianping still in his arm. He also kissed her and praised, "Smells as good!" Laughing heartily, he snatched a bundle of his clothes, dashed out of the room, and locked the door behind him.

Chapter 13
Overturning family and heaven by borrowed hand, seizing prosperity and decline, replacing the old with the new
(Translated by Foxs)

Three men were tied to the wooden pillars, their naked upper bodies had already been badly mutilated by flogging. One was a big man with beard like a young horned-dragon, the other two were twenty-something young men, one was fair-skinned, the other had tattoo all over his body, he had a fierce looking tiger head tattooed on his chest.

Wei Xiaobao's residence was west of Qian Qing Gate [Gate of Heavenly Purity], south of the southern warehouse, to the side of the Imperial Catering Department. Heading north, winding around the Yang Xin Hall [Hall of Mental Cultivation], Wei Xiaobao turned abruptly to the west, walking passed Western Three Places, Yang Hua [Magnificent Nurturing(?)] Gate, Shou An [Longevity Peace] Gate, to the north passed Shou An Palace, by the side of Ying Hua [Heroic Splendor] Palace Hall, turning east passing Xi Tie [Western Iron] Gate, and then turning north again out of Shen Wu Gate [Gate of Divine Might]. Shen Wu Gate was the Imperial Palace's back door, as he walked out the Shen Wu Gate, he was practically out of the Imperial Palace, and he went straight away to the Gao Sheng Teahouse.

As soon as he sat down, the teahouse proprietor served him tea. He saw Gao Yanchao was slowly walking in and signaling him with his eyes. Wei Xiaobao nodded. When he saw Gao Yanchao was leaving the teahouse, he took several sips of the tea, then threw a coin on the table, while saying, "The story today is not worth hearing." And then he leisurely strolled out. He saw Gao Yanchao was waiting on a street corner. Walking several steps further, he saw two sedan chairs.

Gao Yanchao let Wei Xiaobao sit on one, while he walked behind the sedan chairs for a short section of the street. After making sure that nobody followed them, he climbed into the other sedan chair.

The porters ran as fast as flying. After travelling for the time needed to cook rice, they stopped. Wei Xiaobao noticed that the sedan chairs stopped in front of a tiny courtyard house. He followed Gao Yanchao in. As soon as they entered the main gate, he saw Tian Di Hui brothers came out to welcome him by bowing and cupping their fists. This time Li Lishi, Guan Anji, Qi Biaoqing and the others had all rushed in from Tianjin, Baoding,

and other places. In addition, Fan Gang, Feng Jizhong, Priest Xuanzhen, as well as Boss Qian were also present.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and asked, “Qian Laoban [Boss Qian/Money], what is your real honored surname and great given name?”

“I don’t dare,” Boss Qian replied, “Subordinate’s real surname is Qian, my real name is Laoben, ‘ben’ from ‘ben lai’ [originally/initial/at first], not ‘ban’ from Laoban [boss], the idea is that doing business will eclipse the initial capital.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed heartily and said, “You are very astute, if you are really doing business, you will turn other people’s initial capital to be your profit.”

Qian Laoben smiled and said, “Wei *Xiangzhu*, you praise me too much!”

They let Wei Xiaobao walked ahead to the main hall and be seated. Guan Anji was most impatient, he said, “Wei *Xiangzhu*, please look at this.” While saying that, he handed over a large gilded red card, filled with several lines of characters written in black ink.

Wei Xiaobao did not take it; he said, “These characters, they recognize me, but I do not have any friendship with them, so this is the first time that we meet each other, I do not recognize them.”

Qian Laoben said, “Wei *Xiangzhu*, it is an invitation, we are invited to have dinner.”

“That’s very good,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Who has done us the honor?”

“The name on the card is Mu Jiansheng,” Qian Laoben said.

Wei Xiaobao was startled. “Mu Jiansheng?” he asked.

Qian Laoben said, “He is the *Xiao Gongye* [young duke] of the

Mu Palace.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded, “Fu Ling Hua Diao pig’s *Gege*,” he said.

“Precisely,” Qian Laoben said.

“Is he inviting all of us to come?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Qian Laoben said, “On the invitation, he is writing very politely: inviting Green Wood Hall’s Wei *Xiangzhu*, to lead Tian Di Hui’s heroes to come for a banquet. It is tonight, at the South Bean Sprout Lane of Chaoyangmen district in Beijing.”

“This time it’s not at the Willow Tree Lane?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“That’s right,” Qian Laoben replied, “Doing business in Beijing, it’s only right to change the lodging place frequently.”

“What do you think he wants?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Do you think they would put damn drug in the food and drink?”

Li Lishi said, “It is reasonable to say that, one: Mu Palace has such a big reputation in Jianghu, two: with his capacity as the young duke, Mu Jiansheng is a great personality who stand and sit at the same level as our *Zongduozhu*, they could not possibly resort to this kind of third-rate shady business. However, there is no such thing as a good meeting, there is no such thing as a good banquet; there is no harm in guarding against Wei *Xiangzhu*’s concern.”

“Shall we go to the feast or not?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Humph, humph, Xuanwei ham, Guo Qiao rice noodle, Yunnan’s steamed chicken, those are enough to make a festive occasion.”

Everybody else looked at each other in dismay, nobody made any noise. After a long while, Guan Anji said, “We all want to ask Wei *Xiangzhu* to decide.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Nice wine, good food, everybody will have some in your tummy tonight. If you want

just average, peaceful dinner, let me play the host, we can go to a restaurant. After dinner, we can play Pai Gow and gamble, or call on some pretty girls, *Xiongdi* will foot all the bills. But if you all want to save my money, then we all go to harass that man surnamed Mu." He sounded so magnanimous, but actually he was being very sly; whether they were going or not, he did not make the decision.

Guan Anji said, "Wei *Xiangzhu* is inviting the brothers to eat, drink and be merry, indeed that is the happiest thing, but if we did not answer the surnamed Mu's invitation, Tian Di Hui's reputation will unavoidably take a dip."

"So you say we should go?" Wei Xiaobao asked, his gaze swept Li Lishi, Fan Gang, Qi Biaoqing, Xuanzhen, Feng Jizhong, Qian Laoben, and Gao Yanchao's faces. He saw everybody was slowly nodding his head.

Wei Xiaobao said, "If everybody say we should go, then we'll go eat his food, drink his wine. We'll counter soldiers with arms, counter water with an earth weir. When the tea is served, we'll hold out our hands, when the rice is served, we open our mouths; but what if poison is being served? We'll simply swallow and take the damn poison into our bellies. It is called 'hero does not fear death, those who fear death are not heroes'."

Li Lishi said, "We'll have to be careful, always on the lookout for some clues. Let's discuss it over, some of us will drink tea, some won't drink, some will drink wine, some won't drink, some won't eat meat, some won't eat fish. Even if they put poison, we won't let them catch everything in one net. But if everybody did not do anything, we would be their laughingstock."

After reaching decision, they chatted for a while. When it was close to the ninth hour [3-5pm], Wei Xiaobao took off his eunuch uniform and took the appearance of a pampered son of an official. He rode on a sedan chair, with everybody else

crowded around him as they walked toward the South Bean Sprout Lane. Wei Xiaobao mused, “In the Palace, day in and day out I am always very scared and on edge, afraid that the old wh0re will come to kill me. How can it be compared to the free and unfettered, happy life of the *Xiangzhu* of the Green Wood Hall? It’s just that Shifu ordered me to be a spy in the Palace. If I get out on my own initiative, I might not be the *Xiangzhu* anymore, then I don’t know if I can keep my little life. I guess we’ll just have to ride the donkey and read the songbook; we’ll wait and see!”

The South Bean Sprout Lane was less than two *li* away. The sedan chair had just stopped, they already heard the beating of drums and the sound of bamboo flute. Wei Xiaobao got out of the sedan chair and heard the sound of *suona*[17]; he thought, “Are they having a wedding? It’s so lively.”

He saw the main gate of a large house with a courtyard opened, a dozen or so men in uniform stood outside the door to welcome them. A young man of about twenty five or twenty six stood on the front, his stature was tall and slim, with exuberant heroic spirit. The young man said, “*Zaixia* Mu Jiansheng, respectfully welcome Wei *Xiangzhu*’s honorable self.”

These days Wei Xiaobao had made friends with royalties, nobilities and high-ranking officials, so he was accustomed with this kind of etiquette and the respectful aspect of greeting each other. As the saying goes, “Residence alters the manner, nurture alters the body.” He was with the Emperor every day, he constantly met princes, nobles, high officials, and generals, they were almost nothing to him; as a result, although he was young, he had already automatically acquired dignified air. Although Mu Jiansheng had quite a reputation, he could not be compared to people like Prince Kang or Wu Yingxiong. Presently he cupped his hand in salute and said, “*Xiao Gongye* is overly courteous, *Zaixia* does not dare to accept.” Seizing up Mu

Jiansheng's appearance, Wei Xiaobao noticed his countenance was rather dark; in general, there was a faint resemblance between his facial features and those of Mu Jianping's.

Mu Jiansheng was already aware that Tian Di Hui's leader in Beijing, Wei *Xiangzhu*, was a child, he also heard from Bai Hanfeng that this child's martial art skill was very low, and that he was a smooth talker, in short, a little rascal. Presumably he could be a *Xiangzhu* only because of his Shifu, Chen Jinnan's support. But presently he saw Wei Xiaobao's calm demeanor, his unrestrained and indifferent manner, and thought, "Perhaps this child has a little bit of martial art school background after all." Immediately he led them all in.

The chairs in the hall were covered in red satin sheath, with brocade cushions on them. Each one was assigned his respective side, as the host and the guest. 'Divine Physician Hermit' Su Gang, Ban Hanfeng, and about a dozen or so men stood behind Mu Jiansheng with hands hanging by their sides.

Mu Jiansheng and Li Lishi, Guan Anji and the others introduced themselves one by one, they all exchanged conventional pleasantries like 'I have been looking forward to meeting you for a long time' and so on and so forth. Li Lishi and the others thought, "This *Xiao Gongye* of the Mu Family does not show arrogance at all, the way he speaks actually follows Jianghu's customs."

The servants served fragrant tea, the musicians by the hall entrance started to play again; it was a grand ceremonious courtesy in welcoming honored guests. Amid the sound of music, Mu Jiansheng gave his order, "Let the banquet begin!" while inviting everybody to enter the inner hall. His subordinates promptly closed the hall door behind them.

There was a large Eight-Immortal table[18] in the middle, draped in embroidered table cloth, with two smaller tables on

the left and right. Although the utensils on the table were not as grand and extravagant as the ones in Prince Kang's mansion, they were quite exquisite. Mu Jiansheng bowed slightly and said, "Wei *Xiangzhu*, please take the seat of honor."

Looking at the current situation, Wei Xiaobao knew this seat of honor was prepared especially for him. "This time," he said, "We have no choice but to be impolite." Mu Jiansheng took the seat on his right-hand side as the host.

After everybody was seated, Mu Jiansheng said, "Please invite Shifu."

Su Gang and Bai Hanfeng went into the inner chamber and reappeared with an old man. Mu Jiansheng stood up to welcome him and said, "Shifu, Wei *Xiangzhu* of Tian Di Hui's Green Wood Hall honored us with his presence today, he truly gives us a lot of face." Turning toward Wei Xiaobao, he said, "Wei *Xiangzhu*, this is Liu Shifu, the benevolent master under whom *Zaixia* has studied."

Wei Xiaobao stood up, cupping his fist across his chest he said, "It's an honor to meet you at last." This old man was big and tall, his face ruddy, with long white beard hanging from his face; he must be over seventy years old, but he was full of vigor, his eyes were shining lively.

The old man's gaze swept on Wei Xiaobao once, then he laughed and said, "Recently Tian Di Hui's reputation is growing …" His voice was really loud, the words he just said sounded like an ordinary person shouting, "… it's because a large number of heroic people with talent come forth. Wei *Xiangzhu* is this young, truly a rare genius of the Wulin world."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "I am young, that is true, but am not heroic person with talent, let alone a genius; in fact, I am only a fool. That day my hand was twisted by Bai Shifu, I was unable to move a single step, even the cry 'Mommy!'

almost came out. *Zaixia*'s martial art is really poor and extremely ordinary. Ha ha, it's laughable! Laughable, ha ha!"

The others were stunned to hear this, their countenances changed. Bai Hanfeng's expression was even queerer.

The old man burst out laughing, and then said, "Wei *Xiangzhu* is frank, it is indeed a hero's true quality. *Lao Fu* [the old man] may have 30% admiration on you."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "30% admiration is a bit too much. 10% or even 5%, as long as you don't regard *Zaixia* as hopeless little beggar, little acrobat or little monkey, that is enough."

The old man burst out in laughter again. He said, "Wei *Xiangzhu* loves to crack jokes."

Priest Xuanzhen said, "Senior's prestige has shaken the southern sky, in Wulin you are known as Iron Back Blue Dragon, Old Hero Liu, is that right?"

The old man laughed and said, "That's right, Priest Xuanzhen actually know the old man's lowly name."

Priest Xuanzhen's heart shivered, "I haven't introduced myself, he has already known my name. The Mu Family this time is very well-prepared. The Iron Back Blue Dragon Liu Dahong has made his name a long time ago, I heard even Mu Tianbo also had deep respect to him. When the Qing army attacked Yunnan, with all his might Liu Dahong rescued the children of Mu Family, and so Mu Jiansheng became the first disciple whom he personally teaches, and other than Mu Jiansheng himself, he became Mu Palace's number one character." Thereupon Priest Xuanzhen bowed and said, "In those days Old Hero Liu put the three tyrants of Nujiang[19] to their deaths and killed Qing troops at Tengchong, your chivalry spread out all over the world. When the younger generation

and young men mentioned the Old Hero, nobody is not awed with respect."

Liu Dahong said, "Hey, hey, that was the matter of many years ago, why do you have to mention it?" But his countenance looked very pleased.

"Shifu," Mu Jiansheng said, "You, Senior, accompany Wei *Xiangzhu* over here."

"Alright!" Liu Dahong said, and sat down next to Wei Xiaobao.

The side facing outward of this Eight-Immortal table was empty. On the head position were Wei Xiaobao and Liu Dahong, on the left were Li Lishi and Guan Anji, on the right were Mu Jiansheng and an empty seat of honor. The Tian Di Hui warriors were wondering in their hearts, "Which formidable character your Mu Palace is going to invite next?"

They heard Mu Jiansheng said, "Help Xu Shifu out to sit, let these good friends see him and set their hearts at ease."

"Yes!" Su Gang responded. He went in and returned supporting someone in his hand.

As soon as Li Lishi and the others saw the man, they were pleasantly surprised, and called out together, "Xu *San Ge* [Third Older Brother]!" This man had a bent back, he was none other than the Eight-Armed Ape Xu Tianchuan. His complexion was wax yellow, apparently he had not recovered from his injury, but his life was obviously not in danger. The Tian Di Hui warriors crowded around him and greeted him noisily, they could not hide their delight.

Mu Jiansheng pointed at the seat above his own and said, "Xu Shifu, please sit right here."

Xu Tianchuan took a step forward, he bowed and cupped his fist toward Wei Xiaobao and said, "Wei *Xiangzhu*, how are you?"

Wei Xiaobao cupped his fist to return the salute and said, "Xu

San Ge, how are you? The medicinal plaster business is not too good lately?”

Xu Tianchuan sighed and said, “Practically there is no business. Subordinate was captured by Wu Sangui’s dogs and narrowly lost my old life. Fortunately Mu Family’s *Xiao Gongye* and Old Hero Liu appeared to rescue me from danger.”

The Tian Di Hui warriors were stunned. “Xu *San Ge*,” Fan Gang said, “Turns out the affair that day was that traitor Wu Sangui’s people’s doing.”

“Exactly,” Xu Tianchuan said, “Those bunch of traitors broke into the Return Of Spring Drug Store, seized me, and that dog thief Lu … Lu Yifeng cursed me and pasted a medicinal plaster on my mouth, saying that he wanted to starve me, and old monkey, to death.”

Hearing that Lu Yifeng was involved in this, they knew it must have had happened just like he said. Fan Gang, Priest Xuanzhen and the others turned toward Su Gang and Bai Hanfeng and said, “That day we have offended you, yet the heroes take *yi qi* very seriously, our Tian Di Hui can’t thank you enough.”

“We don’t dare,” Su Gang said, “We only followed *Xiao Gongye*’s order, we do not dare to claim credit for ourselves.” Bai Hanfeng snorted; obviously the rescue of Xu Tianchuan was greatly against his wish.

Guan Anji said, “After Xu *San Ge* was captured, we went looking for him everywhere, but did not find any clue; obviously our anxiety needs not be mentioned. Unexpectedly your honored Palace has rescued Xu *San Ge*, making us quite admire you.”

Su Gang said, “The Yunnan’s dog officials under Wu Sangui are Mu Family’s archenemy, naturally we always follow them up very closely. It’s not strange that we found out about this dog

official offending Xu *San Ge*."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "This *Xiao Gongye* is very astute, his *Meizi* is being locked up by me, he rescued old man Xu first so that he can ask me to release his *Meizi*. I'd better pretend I don't understand, see what else he is going to say." He said to Xu Tianchuan, "Xu *San Ge*, you were heavily injured by Bai *Er Xia*, the strength of his hands was very fierce, are you going to live? You are not going to return to heaven, are you?"

Xu Tianchuan said, "Bai *Er Xia* was acting with leniency that day, after recuperating these past several days, subordinate feels a lot better." Bai Hanfeng glowered at Wei Xiaobao, but Wei Xiaobao simply chuckled, as if he was completely oblivious.

The servants poured the wine and served the dishes, it was a very sumptuous banquet. Tian Di Hui warriors thought that since the Mu Family had rescued Xu Tianchuan, and with the presence of renowned old hero such as the Iron Back Blue Dragon Liu Dahong, they could not possibly put poison in the food; all anxiety had left their hearts, they drank the wine and ate the dishes to their hearts' content.

Liu Dahong drank three cups of wine; stroking his beard he said, "Brothers[20], within the capital district[21], which brother is in charge of your precious society?"

Li Lishi said, "In our humble society in the capital district, the one with the most revered position is Wei *Xiangzhu*."

Liu Dahong nodded. "Very good, very good!" he said, and drank another cup of wine. He asked, "But I wonder if this little brother is able to somehow take responsibility in the dispute between your precious Society and our Family?"

"*Laoyezi*[22]," Wei Xiaobao said, "Whatever instruction you have, there is no harm in telling us here. I, Wei Xiaobao, am small in stature and have narrow shoulder. Small matter, I can

take care of 10% or 5%, big matter may crush me flat."

The Tian Di Hui and Mu Palace warriors could not help but frowning slightly; they thought, "This child talk hoodlum talk; as soon as he opens his mouth, he speaks like a rascal, not like a hero or a warrior talks."

Liu Dahong said, "If you cannot take responsibility, while we cannot simply let the matter drop, then we will have no choice but to have little brother pass on to your revered master, asking Chen *Zongduozhu* to rush over and deal with it."

Wei Xiaobao said, "What is it that *Laoyezi* wanted me to pass on to my Shifu? Just write a letter, and we will deliver it to him."

"Hey, hey," Liu Dahong laughed, "This matter concerns the death of Bai Hansong, Bai *Xiongdi*, in the hands of Xu *San Ye* [third master]. I wonder how we are going to settle this, I want to ask Chen *Zongduozhu* to say a few words about it."

Xu Tianchuan suddenly sprang up and boldly said, "Mu *Xiao Gongye*, Old Hero Liu, you have snatched me back to life from the hands of the traitors, you have spared me from the humiliation from those wicked men, *Zaixia* is deeply grateful. Bai *Da Xia* was accidentally injured under *Zaixia*'s hands. *Zaixia* will pay a life for a life, my old life to compensate his; why would you make things difficult for Chen *Zongduozhu* and Wei *Xiangzhu*? Fan *Xiongdi*, let me use your blade." While saying that, he held out his right hand toward Fan Gang. His meaning was very obvious, he wanted to cut his own throat right there and then to bring this contentious issue to completion.

"Slow down, slow down!" Wei Xiaobao said, "Xu *San Ge*, please sit down, don't be this impatient. You are already old, how come you still have such temper? I am the *Xiangzhu* of the Green Wood Hall, am I not? If you do not obey my order, you are not giving me a face at all."

In the Tian Di Hui, 'not following order' was a major offense,

Xu Tianchuan hastily bowed down and said, “Xu Tianchuan understands his offense, I am obeying Wei *Xiangzhu*’s order.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded. “Now that’s only proper,” he said, “Bai *Da Xia* is dead, nothing we can do about it. Even if Xu *San Ge* pay with your own life, human’s life cannot be transferred. No matter what it is a lose-lose situation, it’s not a good business sense at all.”

Everybody’s gaze was fixed on his face, nobody knew what nonsense he was going to say next. Tian Di Hui warriors were especially anxious, they all thought, “Our Society’s reputation in Wulin simply cannot be ruined by this ‘do-not-understand-anything’ little *Xiangzhu*. If he continues speaking rubbish and this matter is known throughout the Jianghu, we won’t have any face left to see other people in the future.”

“*Xiao Gongye*,” they heard Wei Xiaobao continue, “This time from Yunnan you come to Beijing, do you only bring along these several friends? It seems like a little bit is missing, is that right?”

“Humph,” Mu Jiansheng snorted and asked, “What is Wei *Xiangzhu* saying?”

“Nothing,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “*Xiao Gongye* is such a respectable figure, you are totally different from me, Wei Xiaobao. You came to the Capital, if you don’t have a bit more escorts, and you are not being careful, some might be arrested by the Tatars’ running dogs; won’t that be greatly not worthwhile?”

Mu Jiansheng raised his long eyebrows as he said, “It’s not that easy for the Tatars’ running dogs to get me.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “*Xiao Gongye*’s martial art is astonishing, in this world … hey, hey … perhaps very few people can be your match, naturally the Tatars won’t be able to catch you. It’s just that … it’s just that not necessarily the rest of the

friends from Mu Palace would have *Xiao Gongye*'s level of skill. If the Tatars are leading away a goat in passing, taking away an ox with hands behind their backs, they were inviting several friends over to their place, that won't be too amusing."

While Wei Xiaobao was giggling and talking frivolously, Mu Jiansheng had been listening with calm face. When Wei Xiaobao finished, he said, "Wei *Xiangzhu*, are you mocking *Zaixia*?" When he spoke those words, his expression became even more unsightly.

"No, no, I did not," Wei Xiaobao said, "In all my life, I have always been bullied by others, I have never bullied other people. Others have grabbed my hand, look, the black and blue has not gone yet, it was so painful that I hovered between life and death. This Bai *Er Xia*, hey, hey, his hand strength is really extraordinary. Those two moves, 'sweeping away a thousand army' and 'high mountain flowing water' are amazing, surely they will be effective to be used to rescue your friends that are captured by the Tatars. No matter what, you will win a victory on raising the flag, it will be an instant success."

Bai Hanfeng's countenance turned ashen, he was about to speak, but in the end he struggled to endure it. Liu Dahong shot a look at Mu Jiansheng before saying, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, your speech is immeasurably tall and deep. We don't quite understand it."

"*Laoyezi* is too polite," Wei Xiaobao said, "Immeasurably low and shallow is possible, but immeasurably tall and deep? I do not dare to accept. It is extremely low and shallow, extremely low and shallow."

Liu Dahong said, "*Xiao Xiongdi* is saying that some people from our Mu Palace were arrested by the Tatars, I wonder what you mean by that?"

"I don't have the slightest meaning," Wei Xiaobao replied,

"*Xiao Wangye*, Liu *Laoyezi*, my drinking capacity is immeasurably low and shallow, most likely it's because I have drunk the wine that I talked nonsense; damn it, I must not say anything."

"Humph," Mu Jiansheng snorted, he was trying hard to control his anger. He said, "Turns out Wei *Xiangzhu* was only chatting to kill time."

"*Xiao Gongye*," Wei Xiaobao said, "You want to chat to kill time? Have you taken a stroll around Beijing?"

"What do you mean?" Mu Jiansheng's voice was threatening.

"Beijing is very big," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Your Kunming in Yunnan is not as big as Beijing, is it?"

Mu Jiansheng sounded angrier. "What do you mean?" he shouted.

Hearing Wei Xiaobao was rambling incoherently, was getting more and more unreasonable, Guan Anji interrupted, "Beijing is very beautiful, it's a pity it is being occupied by the Tatars. We, people with slight courage and uprightness, are angry and full of grievances."

Wei Xiaobao ignored his remark, he kept rambling, "*Xiao Gongye*, you invited me to drink wine, *Zaixia* does not have anything to repay you. When you have a spare time, I'll take you for a stroll around Beijing. With a friend guiding your way, you won't go astray. Otherwise, if you rush and wander aimlessly, and not being careful, you might enter the Imperial Palace. Although *Xiao Gongye* has high level of martial art, it might not be too convenient for you."

Liu Dahong said, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, there must be another meaning beyond your words. If you regard me as a friend, may I ask that you speak a little bit clearer?"

"I can't speak any clearer than this," Wei Xiaobao said,

“Friends from the Mu Palace all have high level of martial art. Those moves, ‘sweeping away a thousand army’ and 'high mountain flowing water', nothing is more formidable than those. It’s a pity that within the Beijing’s city wall, everything is unfamiliar. When you roam around the street in the depth of the night, you can’t look everything clearly; confused and muddleheaded, you might end up entering the Forbidden City.”

Liu Dahong shot Mu Jianzheng another look; he asked Wei Xiaobao, “What do you mean?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “I heard there are so many gates and so many palaces in the Forbidden City, if you walked in carelessly, without the Emperor or Empress Dowager to show the way, it is so easy for you to get lost, and then you won’t be able to get out forever; it has happened before. *Zaixia* does not have enough face, I don’t know if the Emperor or Empress Dowager will have a free time to show me around, daytime or nighttime. Perhaps Mu Palace’s *Xiao Gongye* has a lot of face, your subordinate friends may bring *Xiao Gongye*’s reputation and may scare the young Emperor and the Empress Dowager, that old wh0re, away. It’s really hard to say.”

Hearing him calling the Empress Dowager ‘the old wh0re’, everybody was quite amused. Guan Anji, Qi Biaoqing, and the others could not help laughing. In his belly, Wei Xiaobao often cursed the Empress Dowager as ‘the old wh0re’, unexpectedly this time, in front of a big crowd of people, he was able to say it out loud; the delight in his heart was unspeakable.

Liu Dahong said, “The people under *Xiao Gongye*’s leadership are all cautious, they can’t possibly enter the Imperial Palace recklessly. I heard that traitor Wu Sangui’s son, Wu Yingxiong, is also in Beijing. He might send people into the Imperial Palace to do some shady business, we don’t know.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded, “Liu *Laoyezi* is right,” he said, “*Zaixia* has a friend with whom I play dice, he is a servant to the

Imperial Bodyguards in the Palace. He said that they have captured several assassins in the Palace last night, the assassins confessed that they are *Xiao Gongye* of Mu Palace's subordinates …"

"What?" Mu Jiansheng was shocked. His right hand trembled, the wine cup in his hand fell down, 'crash!' it broke into several pieces.

Wei Xiaobao said, "At first I was convinced, thinking that the Mu Family is a greatly devoted subject of the Great Ming, they must have sent some people to assassinate the Tatar Emperor, indeed … indeed that is the conduct of a great hero and warrior. But now, listening to Liu *Laoyezi*, I know that they were the subordinates of that traitor Wu Sangui, we must never spare them. I will go to that friend immediately and tell him to think of a way to fix those assassins. Damn it, the subordinates of big traitor, what good are they? I must have them suffer some more."

Liu Dahong said, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, what is your friend's honored surname and great given name? Which post does he hold in the Tatars' Palace?"

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, "He is only a little servant to the Imperial Bodyguards, sweeping the floor, making them tea, cleaning their chamber pots, it's really embarrassing just to mention him. Others call him *Lai Li Tou Xiao Sanzi*[23]. What honored surname and great given name? Those assassins are being tied up, originally I was going to ask *Lai Li Tou Xiao Sanzi* to sneak something good for them to eat. But now that Liu *Laoyezi* said that they are the traitor's men, I am going to tell him to take a knife and poke several holes on their thighs, so that those turtle bastards cannot escape."

"I was just guessing," Liu Dahong said, "I cannot ascertain. But since they dared to enter the Palace to assassinate the

Emperor, they must be real great hero. If Wei *Xiangzhu* can ask your noble friend to look after one or two of them, that is also showing the *yi qi* of Jianghu."

Wei Xiaobao said, "This *Lai Li Tou Xiao Sanzi* is very good to me, when he lost in gambling, I always lend him ten *taels*, eight *taels*, and I have never asked him to pay me back. Whatever instruction *Xiao Gongye* and Liu *Laoyezi* have, I will ask Xiao Sanzi to do it for you, he won't dare to make excuses."

Liu Dahong let out a relieved sigh, he said, "In that case, I wonder if you could tell me how many assassins were captured, and what their names are. Those assassins' courage is not small, we admire them very much, at present I wonder if they have already suffered very much. If your precious Society can inquire for us, *Zaixia* will be very indebted to Wei *Xiangzhu*."

Wei Xiaobao struck his own chest and said, "That's easy. Too bad those assassins are not *Xiao Gongye*'s subordinate brothers; otherwise, I will try to get one out and hand him over to *Xiao Gongye*, a life for a life, then the matter of Xu *San Ge* accidentally harmed Bai *Da Xia* can be written off in one stroke."

Liu Dahong turned his head to look at Mu Jiansheng; he nodded slowly. Mu Jiansheng said, "We don't know who those assassins are, but since they dared to assassinate the Tatar Emperor, they are men with lofty ideals, our compatriots in fighting the Qing restoring the Ming. Wei *Xiangzhu*, if you can find a way to save them, regardless of whether you will succeed or not, Mu Jiansheng will be eternally grateful. Naturally the matter of Xu *Sanye* and Bai *Dage* needs not be mentioned anymore."

Wei Xiaobao turned to look at Bai Hanfeng and said, "*Xiao Gongye* won't mentioned it, but I am afraid Bai *Er Xia* is not willing to let the matter drop. Next time he will grab my hand again and crush it until I cry; now that will be very upsetting."

Bai Hanfeng suddenly stood up and said loud and clear, “If Wei *Xiangzhu* can rescue our … our … can rescue those chivalrous patriots who have fallen into the enemy’s hands, and the one surnamed Bai offended Wei *Xiangzhu*, I will cut off my own hand as my apology to Wei *Xiangzhu*.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed. “No need, no need,” he said, “You give me your hand, what shall I do with it? Besides, that *Lai Li Tou* brother of mine has no skill whatsoever to save people in the Palace, so it will be very hard to say. These men have come to assassinate the Emperor, that was a major criminal offense, I don’t know how many fetters and shackles are binding their bodies, I also don’t know how many guards are watching over them. I said I was going to save people, I was only bragging; just consider we all are chatting to kill the time.”

Mu Jiansheng said, “Naturally we know that entering the Imperial Palace to save people is extremely difficult, we do not dare to hope for any success; but as long as Wei *Xiangzhu* is willing to give your all in trying, it does not matter if you succeed nor not, you can get them out or not, everybody will be grateful all the same.” After a short pause, he added, “There is one more thing, my sister suddenly went missing the other day, *Zaixia* is very concerned. Tian Di Hui friends’ network of friends in the Capital is extensive, your informers numerous; if you could help us inquire around and find a way to rescue her, *Zaixia* simply can’t thank you enough.”

“That’s easy,” Wei Xiaobao said, “*Xiao Gongye* may put your hundred and twenty hearts at ease. Very well, we have drunk enough wine, I am going to look for that *Lai Li Tou Xiao Sanzi* to talk it over. Damn it, I’ll play two rounds with him and make him bankrupt.” He put out his hand and groped something from his pocket and threw it onto the Eight-Immortal table. Surprisingly, it was four dice. The dice rolled for a moment, then four red dots faced upwards. Wei Xiaobao clapped and said,

“Success across the board, success across the board [lit. ‘Hall full of red’], it’s extraordinary good luck! Ay, it would be good if they all were not beheaded, not killed that the hall is full of red.” Everybody looked at each other with changed expression, they were completely stunned.

Wei Xiaobao picked up the dice, cupped his fist and said, “Thank you for your hospitality, we are taking our leave. Xu *San Ge* is coming back with us, can he?”

“Wei *Xiangzhu* is too polite,” Mu Jiansheng said, “*Zaixia* will send Wei *Xiangzhu*, Xu Sanye, and Tian Di Hui friends off.”

And thus Wei Xiaobao, Xu Tianchuan, Li Lishi, Guan Anji, and the others left the banquet tables and walked out. Mu Jiansheng, Liu Dahong and the others sent them off outside the main gate; they did not return back to the house until Wei Xiaobao had climbed onto the sedan chair.

The warriors returned to the small courtyard house. Guan Anji was most impatient, he asked, “Wei *Xiangzhu*, were there assassins in the Palace last night? Looking at their expression, most likely they were sent by the Mu Palace.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Exactly. The assassins entered the Palace last night, nobody dared to leak this secret. No one outside the Palace knew about it, yet they did not seem to be surprised, naturally it was their doing.”

Xuanzhen said, “They dared to assassinate the Tatar Emperor, they can be considered extremely daring, indeed they deserved other people’s admiration. Wei *Xiangzhu*, their men were captured, did you say you could rescue them? I’m afraid this is an extremely difficult matter.”

When talking with Mu Jiansheng and Liu Dahong at the banquet table, Wei Xiaobao had already hatched a plan. To save the captured assassins was definitely not a possibility, but in his own room, one Xiao Junzhu and one Fang Yi were lying down

nicely on the bed. Xiao Junzhu was not an assassin; she was kidnapped by Tian Di Hui and brought into the Palace, so her release did not count. Fang Yi, on the other hand, was an assassin who broke into the Palace; he thought that finding a way to smuggle her out should not be a difficult matter. As he heard Xuanzhen's question, Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, "To save all is impossible, but to get one or two out, most probably it is still manageable. Xu *San Ge* only killed Bai Hansong one person, we only need to get one person out to be returned to them. One life for one life, they do not suffer any loss. Much less not only they will get both the capital and profit, they will also get the interest; we will return to them that little miss Boss Qian has kidnapped, what else can they say? Boss Qian, early tomorrow morning, bring two dead pigs to the Catering Department, we will pack the people inside, then I'll throw a fit in the kitchen, scolding, swearing and berating you [orig. 'pour dogs blood on you'], saying that those two pigs are not good, and will force you to take them out of the Palace at once."

Boss Qian clapped his hands and laughed. "Wei *Xiangzhu*'s idea is marvelous," he said, "The dead pig for fixing Xiao Junzhu is not a problem, but the other one must be a jumbo size."

Wei Xiaobao uttered several words of encouragement to Xu Tianchuan; he said, "Xu *San Ge*, don't you worry, that dog thief Lu Yifeng offended you, I have told Wu Yingxiong to break his dog legs."

"Yes, yes," Xu Tianchuan replied, "Thank you Wei *Xiangzhu*." But in his heart he did not believe him, "This child is babbling nonsense again. Wu Yingxiong is the Heir Apparent of Ping Xi Wang, he is extremely arrogant, how could he listen to you?" Wei Xiaobao was helping him settling the intractable problem of unintentional killing of Bai Hansong. Although Xu Tianchuan was deeply grateful, he was not completely convinced that Wei Xiaobao would be able to accomplish this important matter.

Wei Xiaobao returned to the imperial palace. He had just entered the Shen Wu Gate when he saw two eunuchs meeting him and said together, “Gui Gonggong, quick, quick, His Majesty is summoning you.”

“What important matter is it?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“His Majesty has been asking for you several times,” one of the eunuchs said, “There must be a very important matter. His Majesty is at the Upper Study Room.”

Wei Xiaobao rushed toward the Upper Study Room. Kangxi was pacing up and down the room, seeing Wei Xiaobao come in, his face revealed a happy expression. “Damn it,” he cursed, “You died and went to where?”

“Reporting to His Majesty,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Your servant was thinking that the assassins were so daring; if we do not catch everything in one net, I am afraid it won’t be too good for us, perhaps they will come back to cause us trouble and make His Majesty worry. We must find the leader who managed that operation in secret. Therefore, just now I changed into civilian clothes and went to great streets and small alleys everywhere; I wanted to try to find out who is the assassins’ leader, is he in the Capital?”

“Very good,” Kangxi said, “What did you find?”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “If I say that as soon as I wanted to find out and immediately find something, it would sound too much of a coincident.” Thereupon he said, “After walking around for half a day, I did not see any suspicious person. I am thinking of going out again tomorrow.”

Kangxi said, “You wander around aimlessly and groping blindly, it may be useless. I have an idea.”

Wei Xiaobao was delighted. “Your Majesty’s idea must be very good,” he said.

Kangxi said, “Just now Dolong came to report that the three captured assassins kept their mouths tightly shut; no matter how much flogging and swindling, they keep saying that they were sent by Wu Sangui. Apparently, we cannot get a sentence of truth by torturing them. I am thinking of simply letting them go.”

“Let them go?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “This … won’t that be too easy for them?”

“These assassins are following orders,” Kangxi said, “Although they rebelled against the authority, killing them is of little significance, what’s more important is to find the master mind behind them, eliminating them in one fell swoop, so that we won’t have future trouble.” Speaking to this point, he smiled and said, “If the wolf cub is released, won’t the wolf cub go find the mother wolf?”

Wei Xiaobao was ecstatic, he clapped his hands and said with a laugh, “Wonderful, wonderful! We release the assassins while scooping them up in secret, they will go to meet with the rebellious thieves’ ring-leader. Your Majesty’s divine strategy really surpasses three Zhuge Liang.”

Kangxi laughed and said, “What do you mean surpasses three Zhuge Liang? Your boot-licking is excessively over the top. The problem is how to scoop the assassins without them knowing it; it won’t be too easy to do. Xiao Guizi, I am sending you on an assignment: you pretend to be the good person, rescue them from the Palace, then those assassins will regard you as one of their own, naturally they will lead you to their leader.”

Wei Xiaobao hesitated. “This …” he muttered.

“Naturally this is a dangerous mission,” Kangxi said, “If they find out, they would immediately want to take your little life. It’s a pity I am the Emperor; otherwise, I am seriously considering doing it myself. It would be very exciting.”

“Your Majesty is giving me order, naturally I will do as you bid,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Even if it was a more dangerous mission, I am not afraid.”

Kangxi was delighted, he patted Wei Xiaobao’s shoulder and said with a laugh, “I already knew that you are smart, and brave, and is most willing to do the job for me. You are but a child, the assassins won’t suspect you. I originally wanted to send two Imperial Bodyguards with high level of martial art to do it, but the assassins are not stupid, they might not be easily fooled. If the first try failed, we can’t try it again the second time. Xiao Guizi, when you are doing this, it will be the same as if I am doing it myself.”

After learning martial art, Kangxi was very eager to give it a try, all along he wanted to do some dangerous things, but as the Emperor, he could not afford to take any risk. By sending Wei Xiaobao to do the job for him, Kangxi regarded him as a substitute. Even if an Imperial Bodyguard could handle this matter better, he would still prefer to send Wei Xiaobao. He thought that in term of age, Xiao Guizi was comparable to his, in term of martial art skill, he was inferior, in term of intelligence, he was also inferior; if he was successful, then Kangxi would definitely be successful as well. Therefore, by sending Xiao Guizi, it was more or less the same as if he personally doing it. Although he could not personally experience it, he could imagine it.

Kangxi also said, “You must be as convincing as possible; it is best if you can pretend to be one of the assassins, kill one or two Imperial Bodyguards on guard duty, let these assassins do not have the slightest doubt toward you. I will order Dolong to relax the check-points to let you take them out of the Palace.”

“Yes!” Wei Xiaobao complied, he said, “But those Imperial Bodyguards’ martial art is good, I am afraid I can’t kill them.”

Kangxi said, “You’d better adapt to the situation, but you must

be careful, don't let the Imperial Bodyguards kill you first."

Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue and said, "If I get killed by the Imperial Bodyguards, that means I would die without knowing the rhyme or reason, Xiao Guizi became rebellious traitor's collaborator instead."

Kangxi rubbed his palms together in extreme excitement, he said, "Xiao Guizi, if you successfully accomplish this mission, what reward do you want from me?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "If I successfully accomplish this mission, Your Majesty will be happy. As long as Your Majesty is happy, any reward is good. Next time Your Majesty is thinking about something fascinating, something fun but dangerous thing to do, you will send me again, and that will be very good."

Kangxi was delighted. "Certainly, certainly!" he said, "Ay, Xiao Guizi, too bad you are an eunuch, otherwise I will definitely make you a high-ranking official."

Wei Xiaobao's heart was moved. "Thank you, Your Majesty," but in his heart he thought, "The day will come when you will discover that I am a fake eunuch; at that time I don't know how angry you will be." He said, "Your Majesty, I am asking you for one favor."

Kangxi smiled, "Do you want to be a high-ranking official?" he asked.

"No!" Wei Xiaobao replied, "I will do whatever you want me to do with red-bellied devotion, if I came across a misfortune, and provoked Your Majesty's anger, I am asking you to spare my life and do not take my head."

Kangxi said, "As long as you serve me with utter devotion, your melon-shaped head will sit steadily on your neck." Finished speaking, he burst into loud laughter.

Coming out of the Upper Study Room, Wei Xiaobao mused, "I

was thinking of freeing Xiao Junzhu and Miss Fang for the Mu Palace, but based on what His Majesty said a moment ago, the release of the assassins has become an imperial order, so there is no hurry to let those two young ladies go. About the assassins' true leader, *Laozi* has just had a drink with them a while ago; shall I let the Emperor know and have that little turtle Mu Jiansheng and that old fellow Liu Dahong arrested? But if Shifu knew I did it, he would never forgive me. Damn it, in the end, do I still want to be a Tian Di Hui *Xiangzhu*?"

In the Palace, everybody fawned on him, plus Kangxi doted on him and trusted him very much. In that instant, he was really thinking of staying in the Palace and be an eunuch for the rest of his life. But then he thought about the Empress Dowager and could not stop his heart from trembling, "That Old Wh0re is determined to seek my demise, *Laozi* will not last for too long in the Palace."

He arrived at the Imperial Bodyguards' compound west of the Palace of Heavenly Purity. The leader of the Imperial Bodyguards on duty was precisely Zhao Qixian. The previous night he had already distributed money, and today from the Imperial Bodyguards Chief Dolong he received some more rewards; he found out it was because Wei Xiaobao had spoken words of praise in front of the Emperor. As soon as he saw Wei Xiaobao arrived, his delight was unspeakable; he sprang up to greet him, saying with a laugh, "Gui Gonggong, what good wind has blown your honorable self's presence in this place?"

Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "I am here to take a look at those brazen rebellious thieves." Stepping closer to his ears, he said in a low voice, "His Majesty sends me here to help with the interrogation, he wants to know who the master mind behind their action."

Zhao Qixian nodded. "Yes," he said, and continued in low voice, "These three rebellious thieves are so tight-lipped, we

have already broken two leather whips, they still stick to their original statement, that Wu Sangui sent them here."

"Let me try to ask them," Wei Xiaobao said.

Entering the western hall, he saw three men were tied to the wooden pillars, their naked upper bodies had already been badly mutilated by flogging. One was a big man with beard like a young horned-dragon, the other two were twenty-something young men, one was fair-skinned, the other had tattoo all over his body, he had a fierce looking tiger head tattooed on his chest. "I wonder if one of these two young men is Liu Yizhou?" Wei Xiaobao mused. Turning his head toward Zhao Qixian he said, "Zhao *Dage*, I am afraid you have caught the wrong persons. Please go out for a moment."

"Yes," Zhao Qixian replied; he turned around and left, closing the door behind him.

Wei Xiaobao asked, "May I know your honored surnames and great given names?"

The one with dragon-beard opened his glowering eyes, "Dog eunuch," he cursed, "Do you think you are worthy to ask *Laozi*'s name?"

Lowering his voice, Wei Xiaobao said, "I received a request from someone to save a friend by the name of Liu Yizhou …" As soon as he said those words, astonishment appeared on the three men's faces as they cast a glance toward each other.

The dragon-bearded man asked, "Who requested it?"

"Is there any Liu Yizhou among you or not?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "If there is, I have something to say; if not, that's all I can say."

The three men were looking at each other again, they looked doubtful, afraid that they might be duped. The dragon-bearded man asked again, "Who are you?"

Wei Xiaobao said, “The two friends who asked me, one is surnamed Mu, the other is surnamed Liu, ‘Iron Back Blue Dragon’. Do you know him?”

The dragon-bearded man loudly said, “Who does not know the ‘Iron Back Blue Dragon’ Liu Dahong in the Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan region? Mu Jiansheng is Mu Tianbo’s son, he is wandering destitute in Jianghu, at this moment nobody knows whether he is dead or alive.” While saying that, he repeatedly shook his head.

Wei Xiaobao nodded and said, “Since the three of you do not know *Xiao Gongye* and Liu *Laoyezi*, you can’t be their friends, so it may be assumed that you do not know these styles.” While saying that, he struck a posture, and then demonstrated the two moves of the Mu Family fist technique; naturally it was the ‘sweeping away a thousand army’ and 'high mountain flowing water'.

“Ah!” the young man with tiger head tattoo on his chest exclaimed. Wei Xiaobao halted, “What is it?” he asked. “Nothing,” the man replied.

“Who taught you those styles?” the dragon-bearded man asked.

“My wife taught me,” Wei Xiaobao replied with a laugh.

“Pei!” the dragon-bearded man spat, “What wife does a court eunuch have?” While saying that, he was constantly shaking his head. At first he cursed Wei Xiaobao as ‘dog eunuch’, after hearing the strange thing he said and the unusual way he behaved, he dropped the ‘dog’ character.

“Why can’t a court eunuch have a wife?” Wei Xiaobao said, “Others are willing to marry, why do you care about it? My wife is surnamed Fang, with the single character given name Yi …”

The fair-skinned young man suddenly bellowed, “Nonsense!”

Wei Xiaobao saw blue veins suddenly stuck out on his forehead, his eyes were spouting fire, his anxiety had reached its extreme point, so he presumed this man must be Liu Yizhou. He had a rectangular face, quite handsome; it's just that under his violent rage, unavoidably his appearance looked rather fearsome. Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "What nonsense? My wife is the later generation of the surnamed Fang of the Mu Family four great generals, Liu Bai Fang Su. The one acting as our matchmaker is surnamed Su, his name is Su Gang, nicknamed 'Divine Physician Hermit'. There is also another matchmaker surnamed Bai, his older brother Bai Hansong was recently killed. That Bai Hanfeng is extremely poor, so he is acting as a matchmaker to earn money, to prepare for his older brother's funeral …"

The more that young man listened, the angrier he got. "You … you … you …" he roared.

The dragon-bearded man shook his head and said, "*Xiongdi*, don't make noise." To Wei Xiaobao he said, "You seemed to know a lot about the Mu Palace's affairs."

Wei Xiaobao said, "I am Mu Palace's son-in-law, how could I not know the affairs of my old man father-in-law? Originally Fang Yi, Miss Fang was unwilling to marry me, she said she was engaged to her *Shige* Liu Yizhou. But then she heard that this surnamed Liu did not make any progress, he threw himself under the leadership of the big traitor Wu Sangui, and entered the Imperial Palace as an assassin. Just think … that big traitor Wu Sangui …" Speaking to this point, he lowered his voice and continued, "… colluding with the Tatars, surrendering our beautiful Great Ming's rivers and mountains to the dog thieves Manchurian Qing with both hands. Not one of our Han people does not want to peel this fellow Wu Sangui's skin and eat his flesh. Why would that fellow Liu Yizhou rely on a bad master, Wu Sangui? Naturally Miss Fang'd face is downcast, she does

not want to marry him anymore."

"I … I … I …" the young man anxiously said.

The dragon-bearded man shook his head, "Everybody has his own ambition," he said, "Sire became a court eunuch in Qing Palace, which not a very honorable thing."

"Right, right!" Wei Xiaobao said, "Naturally it is not a very honorable thing. My wife is anxious over her old flame, she wanted me to investigate clearly, whether that Liu Yizhou has died or not. If he is really dead, she will marry me with a clear conscience, henceforth does not have to worry over the deceased. She only wants to set up a memorial tablet for her Liu *Shige*, and burn some ritual paper money for him. Friends, there is no Liu Yizhou among you, is there? Then I shall return to Miss Fang, tonight we are going to bow to the Heaven and Earth to get married." Saying that, he turned around to leave.

The young man said, "I am …" But the dragon-bearded man shouted, "Don't be fooled!" The young man struggled a moment, he said angrily, "He … he …" suddenly he spat toward Wei Xiaobao.

Wei Xiaobao dodged sideways. He saw that the hands and feet of those three were firmly bound to the pillars using thick ox tendon, it was definitely very hard for them to struggle free. He mused, "This man is obviously Liu Yizhou, he was about to confess, but was stopped by that bearded man." After thinking for a moment, he had another idea; he said, "You wait here, I am going to ask my wife again."

Returning to the outside, he said to Zhao Qixian, "I have found a clue. Don't beat them anymore; I will be back in a moment."

By this time the sky had darkened, Wei Xiaobao thought that Fang Yi and Mu Jianping should be very hungry by now, so he did not go straight back to his room, but stopped by the

Catering Department instead, to instruct his subordinate eunuchs to deliver a sumptuous banquet to his room, saying that he wanted to invite the Imperial Bodyguards who had set up some merits the previous night to a banquet to congratulate them, that they were going to discuss some confidential matter on capturing the assassins during the banquet, therefore, he did not need any little eunuchs to wait upon them.

He unlocked his room and lightly pushed the door to the inner room. Mu Jianping cried out lightly and sat up. “What took you so long to come back?” she asked in soft voice.

“I made you very anxious waiting for me, didn’t I?” Wei Xiaobao said, “I have good news.”

Fang Yi lifted her head from the pillow and asked, “What good news?”

Wei Xiaobao lighted the candle on the table, he saw Fang Yi’s eyes were red, apparently she had been crying. He sighed and said, “This good news is for you, but for me it is a very bad news. I have just succeeded in obtaining a good wife, now she flew away into the thin air. Ay, that fellow Liu Yizhou unexpectedly has not died.”

“Ah!” Fang Yi let out a cry, her voice was brimming with joy.

Mu Jianping happily asked, “Is our Liu *Shige* safe and sound?”

“He has not died all right,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “But it might not be easy for him to stay alive. He was captured by the Imperial Bodyguards in the Palace, and stated decisively that he was sent by the big traitor Wu Sangui to assassinate the Emperor. With his capital crime, no doubt it will be difficult for him to escape, but if this news ever spread out, the Jianghu heroes and warriors will all say that he has become Wu Sangui’s lackey, after he is beheaded, his reputation will stink very much.”

Fang Yi raised her upper body and said, “Before entering the

Imperial Palace, we have already considered this possibility, but in order to topple this traitor Wu Sangui and avenge the bitter hatred and deep enmity of the late emperor and Mu *Gongye*, we have already abandoned any thought to our own lives and our reputation after we died."

Wei Xiaobao raised his thumb, "Good," he said, "You have moral backbone! Wu Laogong [see footnote 4 of Chapter 11] admires you very much. Miss Fang, we have an important matter we need to discuss. If I can save your Liu *Shige*'s life, what would you do?"

The light in Fang Yi's eyes flickered, her cheeks blushed, she said, "If you can seriously save my Liu *Shige*'s life, no matter what difficult or dangerous thing you want me to do, Fang Yi will not knit my brows." She said those words with determination in her voice, it was extremely straightforward.

"What if we make a deal?" Wei Xiaobao said, "Xiao Junzhu can be our witness. If I can save your Liu *Shige* and get him out, and hand him over to *Xiao Gongye* Mu Jiansheng and 'Iron Back Blue Dragon' Liu Dahong …"

"You know my *Gege* and my Shifu?" Mu Jianping interrupted.

"The Mu Family's *Xiao Gongye* and 'Iron Back Blue Dragon' have grand reputation," Wei Xiaobao said, "Who does not know them? Who has never heard of their names?"

"You are a good person," Mu Jianping said, "If you save Liu *Shige*'s life, everybody will be very grateful of your kindness."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head, "I am not a good person," he said, "I am simply making a deal. This man Liu Yizhou is not a small matter, he is a criminal who came to assassinate the Emperor himself. By wanting to save him, I am placing my own life in great danger, am I right? If the government authority found out, not only my own head would roll, my grandpas, grandmas, papa, mama, my three *Gege*, four *Meizi*, plus my

uncles, aunts, cousins[24], everybody at home would lose their heads, am I right? This is called 'execution of the whole family unto the third generation'. The gold, silver, house, pots and pans, pants, shoes, everything in my home would belong to the government official, am I right?"

Each time he asked, 'am I right?' Mu Jianping nodded her head.

"Exactly right," Fang Yi said, "The implication of this matter is too great, I can't simply ask you to do it. In any case, if my … my … my *Shige* died, I don't want to live. Let's just resign to our fate." While saying that, tears flooding down on her face.

Wei Xiaobao said, "There's no hurry to grieve, there's no hurry to cry. You are such a 'bashful flower obstructing the moon', as soon as your tears flow, my heart turns soft. Miss Fang, I'll do anything for you. I will definitely save your Liu *Shige*'s life and get him out. Let's settle this now: if I cannot save and get your Liu *Shige* out, I will become your ox or your horse, your slave for the rest of my life; if I can save and get your Liu *Shige* out, you will be my wife for the rest of your life. A real man gave his words, some horses cannot chase it, and that's that."

Fang Yi looked at him in a daze, the color on her cheek gradually vanished, until her face turned deathly pale. "Gui *Dage*," she said, "In order to save Liu *Shige*'s life, whatever … I am willing to do whatever you want me to. If you really can rescue him to safety and he is safe and sound, and you want me to serve you … to serve you for the rest of my life, it won't be impossible. It's just that … It's just that …" She had just spoken those words when there were footsteps outside, and then someone called out, "Gui Gonggong, the food and wine is here." Fang Yi stopped talking immediately.

"Alright!" Wei Xiaobao said. He walked out the room, locked the inside door, and open the front door.

Four eunuchs carried food, bowls and cups on a shoulder pole. They entered the room and set up the table in the front room. There were twelve large bowls of vegetable and meat dishes, plus one pot of Yunnan's steamed chicken. The four eunuchs arranged eight set of bowl and chopsticks, and then respectfully said, "Gui Gonggong, is there anything else you need?"

"This will do," Wei Xiaobao said, "You may go back." Each person received one *tael* tip. The four eunuchs returned, pleased with the heaven, happy with the earth.

Wei Xiaobao bolted the front door, and brought the food into the inner room. He pulled a table to the front of the bed, poured three cups of wine and scooped three bowls of rice. "Miss Fang," he said, "Just now you said, 'It's just that … It's just that …', what was it that you were going to say?"

By now Mu Jianping had helped Fang Yi to sit up, the color on her face had returned. She lowered her head and was silent for half a day before finally spoke in a low voice, "I was going to say that you are an officer in the Palace, how can you marry? But no matter what, if you can save my Liu *Shige*'s life, I will accompany you for the rest of my life."

Her countenance was sparkling and translucent like jade, shining pink under the candlelight, so out-of-the-worldly tender and beautiful. Although Wei Xiaobao was very young, he looked at her as if his soul had left him. He laughed and said, "Turns out you wanted to say that I am an eunuch, and thus cannot take a wife. Whether I take a wife or not, it's my business, it's none of your concern. I just want to ask you: are you or are you not willing to be my wife?"

Fang Yi's delicate eyebrows were slightly wrinkled, a faint trace of anger appeared on her face. After half a day she made up her mind and said, "Let alone be your wife, even if you sell me to the pleasure house to be a prostitute, I am also willing."

If any other man were to hear it, he definitely would not be happy, but Wei Xiaobao grew up in a brothel, so he did not feel anything strange. With a chuckle he said, “Alright, it’s a deal. Good wife, Good *Meizi*, let the three of us drink a cup.”

At first Fang Yi did not even regard this little eunuch as someone worthy of her attention, and then she saw how he personally stabbed the Imperial Bodyguard Deputy Chief Rui Dong and dissolved his body with some strange medicine. She also saw how the Imperial Bodyguards and his fellow eunuchs were very respectful toward him; now she believed definitely nothing was ordinary about him. Liu Yizhou was the man she fell in love with, although they had not formalized their engagement, their two hearts already beat as one; one would not want to take another as husband [orig. ‘lord’], the other would not love another as wife. The previous night the two of them entered the Palace on mission together, Fang Yi saw with her own eyes Liu Yizhou slipped and was captured by the Imperial Bodyguards, while she herself suffered an injury, so that she was unable to help. She thought that her boyfriend had given his life for their common cause; who would have thought that this little eunuch said that not only her lover did not die, he even said that he could find a way to rescue him.

She thought, “As long as Liu *Lang*[25] can escape from danger, although I have to suffer hardship for the rest of my life, I will still thank the Heaven for not treating me badly. How can this little eunuch take me as his wife anyway? He’s just oily-mouthed and a smooth-talker, he only wants to win the argument, I might as well play along with him.” As she thought about this reasoning, she showed a faint smile as she raised the wine cup with both hands, saying, “I will drink this cup of wine with you, but if you do not save my Liu *Shige*, you won’t escape being a ghost by my sword.”

Seeing her flowery dimples, Wei Xiaobao’s heart was very

happy; he also raised the wine cup with both hands and said, “May our words be like striking nail through the foot, there will be no denial. If I save your Liu *Shige*, but you go back on your words and marry him, then what? With the two of you join hands and feet, I won’t be your match; he sweeps his saber across, you hack your sword down, I, Gui Gonggong, will immediately turn into four pieces. I simply cannot not guard against this thing.”

With a smile on her face Fang Yi solemnly said, “By the Emperor of Heaven above and the Queen of Earth below, if Gui Gonggong can rescue Liu Yizhou and bring him to safety, the lowly woman Fang Yi will be willing to be Gui Gonggong’s wife, and will be loyal and dependable to my husband with singleness of heart for the rest of my life, even if Gui Gonggong cannot take me as wife for real, I am dead set on taking care of him for a lifetime. If I am double-minded, let me be cut into ten thousand pieces and will not be reincarnated.” Finished speaking, she poured the wine to the floor. She also said, “Xiao Junzhu is my witness.”

Wei Xiaobao was ecstatic, he turned to ask Mu Jianping, “Good *Meizi*, do you have any sweetheart you want me to rescue?”

“Of course I don’t!” Mu Jianping replied, “How can I have any sweetheart?”

“What a pity, what a pity!” Wei Xiaobao said.

“What a pity what?” Mu Jianping asked.

“If you have a sweetheart,” Wei Xiaobao explained, “I will also rescue him and get him out, then won’t you also be willing to be my wife?”

“Pei!” Mu Jianping spat, “You already have one wife and it’s not enough? What an endless greed[26]!”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “The toad wants to eat the

swan's flesh! Hey, Good *Meizi*, other than your Liu *Shige*, there are two other men being captured, one with jaw full of whiskers …"

"That must be Wu *Shishu* [martial (younger) uncle]," Mu Jianping said.

"The other has tattoo all over his body," Wei Xiaobao said, "With a tiger head on his chest."

"That must be Blue Haired Tiger Ao Biao," Mu Jianping said, "He is Wu *Shishu*'s disciple."

"What is that Wu *Shishu*'s name?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Wu *Shishu*'s name is Wu Lishen," Mu Jianping replied, "His nickname is Shaking-head Lion."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "That nickname is very appropriate, whatever other people say, he always shakes his head."

"Gui *Dage*," Mu Jianping said, "Since you are going to rescue Liu *Shige*, you might as well try to rescue Wu *Shishu* and Ao *Shige*."

"Do your Wu *Shishu* and Ao Biao also have 'bashful flower obstructing the moon' women?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"I don't know," Mu Jianping replied, "Why do you ask?"

Wei Xiaobao replied, "I am going to ask their good-looking women first, to see if they would be willing to let me take an advantage, otherwise, won't I be staking my life to save others in vain?" Suddenly a dark shadow flashed before his eyes, some kind of object flew toward his face. Wei Xiaobao hastily ducked, but he was too late. 'Crash!' that object smashed right in the middle of his forehead. It was a wine cup.

"Aiyo!" Wei Xiaobao and Mu Jianping cried out together. Wei Xiaobao leaped three steps backward, and crashed into a chair.

Blood streamed down from his forehead, wine blurred his vision that all he saw was a vast expanse of whiteness.

He heard Fang Yi shouted harshly, “Go and kill Liu Yizhou immediately, your miss does not want to live anymore, so that I won’t receive this kind of senseless humiliation from you all day!” Turned out the wine cup was thrown by Fang Yi. Luckily, due to her severe wound, she lost the strength of her hand. Wei Xiaobao’s forehead was hit by the wine cup, but the scratch was only skin deep.

Mu Jianping said, “Gui *Dage*, come here, let me look at your wound, don’t let the broken porcelain pieces remain in your flesh.”

“I am not coming near you,” Wei Xiaobao said, “My own wife wants to murder her husband.”

“Who told you to speak nonsense?” Mu Jianping said, “You want to take advantage of other women. Even I was angry to hear it.”

Wei Xiaobao burst into loud laughter. “Ah, I get it,” he said, “Turns out the two of you are drinking vinegar. Hearing that I was going to take advantage of other women, my first wife, my second wife, are drinking vinegar in a big way.”

Mu Jianping picked up her wine cup and said, “What did you call me? See if I don’t throw this wine cup on you.”

Wei Xiaobao used his sleeve to wipe his eyes. Seeing Mu Jianping pretend to be angry, but with a slight smile at the tips on her brow and the corners of her eyes, also Fang Yi look apologetic, although his forehead was painful, Wei Xiaobao’s heart was very happy. He said, “My first wife threw a wine cup, if my second wife did not throw, it would be unfair.” He took a step forward and said, “Second wife may throw the wine cup!”

“Alright!” Mu Jianping said. Raising her hand, she splashed the half-cup of wine onto his face.

Unexpectedly Wei Xiaobao did not evade; the half-cup of wine trickled down his face. He stuck his tongue out and licked the blood and wine on his face, saying, “Delicious, delicious! The first wife cut the blood, plus the second wife splashed the wine. Aiyo! I die tasty, I die tasty!”

Mu Jianping was the first to laugh, followed by a ‘pft!’ from Fang Yi; she could not restrain her laughter. “Rascal!” she cursed. From her bosom she produced a handkerchief and gave it to Mu Jianping, saying, “Wipe his face.”

Mu Jianping laughed and said, “You are the one who hurt others, why do I have to wipe it?”

Covering her mouth, Fang Yi said, “Aren’t you his second wife?”

“Pei!” Mu Jianping spat, “You promised yourself to him just a moment ago, I did not promise him anything.”

Fang Yi laughed and said, “Who said you haven’t promise him anything? He said, ‘Second wife may throw the wine cup’, and you raised your wine cup and splashed him; isn’t that the same as you agree to be his second wife?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed. “That’s right, that’s right!” he said, “My first wife is hurt, my second wife is also hurt. The two of you may set your hearts at ease; I am not going to fool around with other women.”

Fang Yi told Wei Xiaobao to come over; seeing there was no porcelain fragment in his forehead wound, she wiped the blood from his face.

The three of them could not drink wine anymore, their stomachs were hungry, so they ate quite a lot of food. Chatting and joking, gaiety filled the room.

Finished eating, Wei Xiaobao yawned and said, “Shall I sleep with the first wife tonight, or the second wife?”

Fang Yi's countenance was grim, she sternly said, "You should stop cracking jokes; if you ever get into the bed, I'll … I'll kill you with a sword."

Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue and said, "There will come a day when my old life will be delivered in your hands." Moving the food to the outside hall, he fetched a woven mat and spread it on the floor, and slept fully clothed. At this time he was really weary, so in just a short moment he fell fast asleep.

The next morning when he woke up, he felt his body was nice and warm. When he opened his eyes, he saw that his body was covered with a quilt; he also felt a pillow under his head. He sat up and noticed the muslin curtain above the bed was hanging down. Through the mosquito net he could faintly see Fang Yi and Mu Jianping were sleeping side by side.

Quietly he stood up and opened the curtain. He saw Fang Yi was tender and beautiful, Mu Jianping was exquisite. The two beautiful women's smart faces were reflecting each other, they looked like bright pearl or beautiful jade; his heart was unspeakably moved by their beauty. Wei Xiaobao could not bear the desire to give each one a kiss on the mouth, but he was afraid he might awaken them. "Damn it," he cursed in his heart, "If these two young ladies truly became my first wife and second wife, *Laozi* will be very happy. There is no young lady as charming as they in the Lovely Spring Courtyard."

As quietly as possible he opened the door. The door hinge creaked, Fang Yi immediately opened her eyes; she smiled and said, "Gui … Gui … Good morning."

"Gui what?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "You did not even call me Good Husband."

"But you have not rescued him yet," Fang Yi replied.

"Don't worry," Wei Xiaobao said, "I am going to rescue him."

Mu Jianping also woke up, "What are you talking about this

early in the morning?" she asked.

"We did not sleep at all," Wei Xiaobao replied, "The two of us talked heart to heart the entire night." He yawned, patted his mouth, and said, "I am so sleepy, I am so sleepy! I want to sleep now." And then he stretched.

Fang Yi blushed, she said, "How can I talk anything good with you? How can it be considered the entire night?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed. "Good wife," he said, "We were talking decently. Please write a letter, I am going to give it to your Liu *Shige*, so that he will believe me and follow me out of the Palace. Or else he would become Wu Sangui's son-in-law …"

"He pretends to be Wu Sangui's son-in-law's nephew," Mu Jianping said.

"Since Miss Fang is going to be my wife, Liu Yizhou won't have any choice but to be Wu Sangui's son-in-law," Wei Xiaobao said.

"Don't prattle!" Fang Yi said, "Writing a letter is good. But … but what should I write?"

"Anything is alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "Just write that I am your husband, the number one good person in the world, one with most *yi qi*, one who accepted your commission to come and rescue him. Genuine goods at fair prices, a hundred percent real gold." He found Hai Dafu's writing brush and ink stone, and some paper. He rubbed the ink, placed a sheet of white paper on the small table, and pushed the table to the front of the bed.

Fang Yi sat up and received the writing brush. Suddenly tears gushing out of her eyes; sobbing, she said, "What should I write?"

Seeing her cute but pitiful appearance, Wei Xiaobao's heart suddenly turned soft. "You may write whatever you want to write," he said, "I am illiterate anyway. You don't need to write

that you have become my wife, otherwise your Liu *Shige* will get angry and won't want me to save him."

"You are illiterate?" Fang Yi asked, "You are lying."

Wei Xiaobao said, "If I know how to read, I am a turtle bastard, and not your husband; I am your son, your distant descendant."

Fang Yi took up the pen, she hesitated, feeling that it was hard to put the pen to the paper, she sobbed and sniffled, and finally broke into crying again. Wei Xiaobao's heart was filled with heroic spirit, which was hard to suppress; he said in a loud voice, "Alright, alright! After I rescue Liu Yizhou and take him out, you can marry him, I don't want to fight with him over you. Besides, even if you followed me, you would still want to be together with him anyway. Rather than wearing a green cap[27] in the future, becoming a cuckold, I'll let you go free and happy, marry that damn Liu Yizhou. Just write whatever you love to write. Damn it, *Laozi* won't care."

With a pair of big eyes still brimming with tears, Fang Yi looked at him, and then she lowered her head, her gaze revealed a happy expression mixed with gratitude. She wrote several lines of characters on the paper, and then folded the paper into a square. "Please … please give it to him," she said.

Wei Xiaobao cursed in his heart, "Damn it, now you don't even call me *Dage*. Tear down the bridge after crossing the river, after setting off the flame, the monk is not needed anymore." But since he had flaunted his heroic spirit, he had to put an air of hero, he could not force Fang Yi to be his wife anymore. He took the folded paper, put it into his pocket, and left without looking back. He mused, "Want to be a hero, one must suffer losses. Such a nice wife, and I have to present it with both hands to another man."

By this time, the leader on duty at the Imperial Bodyguards'

compound by the Palace of Heavenly Purity was Zhang Kangnian. The previous night he had received the order from Dolong to give assistance to Gui Gonggong who was on rescue mission to take the assassins out of the Palace, but he had to do it discreetly, without rousing the assassins' suspicion. Seeing the arrival of Wei Xiaobao, he busily stepped forward to greet him. He gave an eye signal to Wei Xiaobao as he took him to the rockery outside. "Gui Gonggong," he said in low voice, "How are you going to rescue them?'

Seeing his friendly attitude, Wei Xiaobao thought, "His Majesty told me to kill one or two Imperial Bodyguards on this rescue mission, so that Liu Yizhou and the others won't be suspicious. But this Zhang *Laoge* ['Ol' older brother Zhang'] is very good to me, I can't bear to kill him. Luckily I have that stinky girl's letter, that 'deserved-to-die' surnamed Liu will believe me a thousand times, ten thousand times." After slight hesitation he said, "I'll go in and interrogate these three sons of a turtle again, and then I'll act accordingly."

Zhang Kangnian laughed while cupping his fist and said, "Thank you very much Gui Gonggong."

"Thank me for what?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Zhang Kangnian replied, "*Xiaoren* simply handling matters following Gui Gonggong's suggestion. In the future I am sure Gonggong will enjoy unceasing promotion. *Xiaoren* will get promoted and enjoy riches, I won't fail in everything I do."

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, "You only need to serve His Majesty with utter devotion, and then in the future you will have only one thing to fear."

Zhang Kangnian was stunned. "What thing?" he asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "That the storage in your home is too small, you can't store more money."

Zhang Kangnian laughed aloud. And then he lowered his voice

and said, “Gonggong, about a dozen of us have made a secret agreement that all of us will do our best to help Gonggong to accomplish your missions. Whatever happens we will support Gonggong to achieve the Head Court Eunuch position in the Palace.”

Wei Xiaobao smiled, “That would be wonderful!” he said, “Let’s wait until I am a few years older before we talk about it again.” Recalling how Qian Laoben delivered a live pig to patch a loophole, he asked, “Where did Deputy Chief Rui Dong go? Dolong *Zongguan* and all of you are very busy, how come I do not see Deputy Chief Rui?”

“Most likely the Empress Dowager sends him on a mission outside the Palace,” Zhang Kangnian replied.

Wei Xiaobao nodded. “When you see Deputy Chief Rui, tell him to come to my room,” he said, “His Majesty wanted me to ask him some questions.” Zhang Kangnian promised to do that.

Wei Xiaobao entered the Imperial Bodyguard building and went straight to the room where Liu Yizhou and the others, three people, were bound. He did not see them for only one night, but their spirits seemed to be weakened a lot. Although they did not receive any more beating, but two days and two nights without any food and drink, even a man made of iron would not be able to withstand. The seven or eight Imperial Bodyguards keeping watch over them stood up and paid their respect to Wei Xiaobao; their manner was very respectful.

Wei Xiaobao loudly said, “His Majesty has issued an imperial decree: these three rebellious thieves committed treason and heresy, they are to be immediately beheaded in public. Quickly get some wine, meat, rice and vegetables, let them eat until they are full, so that when they die, they won’t be hungry ghosts.” The Imperial Bodyguards complied with one voice.

The dragon-bearded man Wu Lishen said in loud voice, “We

will be loyal to Ping Xi Wang to the death, we are leaving a good name for hundreds of generation, ten thousand times better than you, animals who become the lackeys of the Tatars.” One of the Imperial Bodyguards raised his whip and lashed it down, while cursing, “That rebellious thief Wu Sangui will be executed soon, along with his entire family to the third generation.”

Liu Yizhou looked agitated, his eyes were staring at the ceiling, his lips were trembling slightly, but nobody knew what he was saying.

The guards brought in three large bowls of rice and three large bowl of wine. Wei Xiaobao said, “When these three rebellious thieves heard they are going to be beheaded, they are shaking from fear all over. I am afraid that the wine, they won’t be able to drink, the rice, they won’t be able to swallow. I must bother three *Xiongdi* a little bit, please feed each of them two mouthful of wine, I don’t want them to drink too much. About the rice, please feed them. If they are drunk, they won’t feel the pain on their neck when their heads roll, it would be too easy for them. When they get to the underworld and Yanluo Wang sees three drunk ghosts, he will be very angry, and then each drunken ghost will get three hundred floggings with the stick. That means we are giving them too much of a bad time.” The Imperial Bodyguards laughed; then they fed the three prisoners the wine and the rice.

Wu Lishen gulping the wine and gobbling the rice, his expression was calm and composed. With each mouthful of rice he ate, Ao Biao uttered a curse, “Dog servant!” Liu Yizhou looked deathly pale, he could not swallow his food, only less than half a bowl later he shook his head and did not want to eat.

“That’s enough,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Everybody out. His Majesty ordered me to ask them some questions. After that, the beheading.”

Zhang Kangnian bowed and said, “Yes!” He led the Imperial Bodyguards out of the room and closed the door behind him.

When Wei Xiaobao heard the sound of their footsteps were far enough, he coughed and then leaned his head toward Wu Lishen, three people, sizing them up; his face showed a furtive smile.

“Dog eunuch,” Wu Lishen cursed, “What’s so funny?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “I am laughing on my own, what does it have to do with you?”

“Gonggong,” Liu Yizhou suddenly said, “I … I am Liu Yizhou!”

Wei Xiaobao was startled, but before he could respond, Wu Lishen and Ao Biao shouted together, “What nonsense are you talking about?”

“Gonggong,” Liu Yizhou said, “I am asking you to save me, please … please save us.”

Wu Lishen shouted loudly, “Greedy for life, afraid of death; what kind of hero or warrior are you? Why should you open your mouth asking for help?”

Liu Yizhou said, “He … he said *Xiao Gongye* and my Shifu asked … asked him to save … to save us.”

Wu Lishen shook his head and said, “He’s just trying to swindle us, and you believe him?”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Shaking Head Lion Wu *Laoyezi* [old master], when you look at my face, could you shake your head a little less?”

Wu Lishen was startled, “You … you …” he said.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “And this gentleman Blue Haired Tiger Ao Biao, Ao *Dage*, is your proud disciple, isn’t he? Famous master must produce outstanding disciple; my utmost admiration.” Wu Lishen and Ao Biao’s countenance changed

greatly; they were so surprised that they were at a loss.

From his pocket Wei Xiaobao produced the folded letter Fang Yi wrote. He unfolded it and held it in front of Liu Yizhou's face. He laughed and said, "Look, who wrote this letter?"

As soon as Liu Yizhou looked, he was overjoyed; with a trembling voice he said, "It's really Fang *Shimei*'s [younger martial sister] handwriting. Wu *Shishu*, Fang *Shimei* said that this … this Gonggong came to rescue us, she is telling me to obey him in everything."

"Bring it here, let me look," Wu Lishen said.

Wei Xiaobao held the letter in front of Wu Lishen; he thought, "I wonder what words of love are written on it; my first wife has no sense of shame, she only wants to snatch a husband, she would write any overly romantic words of love." He heard Wu Lishen read: "'Liu *Shige*, Gui Gonggong is one of us, his righteousness reaches the clouds and the sky, his action braves strange dangers, he has come to save, you must listen to Gui Gonggong's directives to escape from the tiger's mouth. Younger sister Yi stated with her own hand.' Um, there is special mark of our Mu Palace at the top; it's actually not a fake."

Hearing in the letter Fang Yi praised him with the words 'his righteousness meager[28] to the clouds and the sky', Wei Xiaobao was puzzled; he thought that the thicker the righteousness the better. When the righteousness is meager, it would only disappear into the air, what else there is to be left? But he had heard people saying those words several times before, so he knew it must be very good words of praise. He also heard that in the letter Fang Yi did not write any overly romantic words of love, he was even more delighted. "What do you mean it's fake?" he asked.

"Gonggong," Liu Yizhou asked, "Where is my Fang *Shimei*?"

In his heart Wei Xiaobao said, “In my room.” But with his mouth he said, “At this moment she is hiding in a very safe place. After I save you and take you out, I’ll find a way to save her, so that you can meet her.”

Tears streaming down from Liu Yizhou’s eyes, sobbing, he said, “I don’t know how to repay Gonggong’s great kindness and benevolence.” When a moment ago he heard Wei Xiaobao said that they were going to be beheaded right after eating and drinking, he was originally brave; but suddenly confronted with life juncture, his fear could not longer be restrained, and he blurted out that he was Liu Yizhou with the hope that in the face of imminent peril[29] he could somehow save his life. By the time he saw Fang Yi’s letter, he found that the chance of survival looked promising, his joy was beyond description.

Yet when facing death Wu Lishen was without any fear; he still wanted to investigate thoroughly. “May I know Sire’s honorable surname and great given name?” he asked, “Why are you willing to lend a hand?”

“I might as well explain everything clearly,” Wei Xiaobao said, “All my friends call me *Lai Li Tou Xiao Sanzi*. Don’t feel strange, I used to have skin disease and dysentery, but now I am healed. I have a good friend, the *Xiangzhu* of Green Wood Hall of Tian Di Hui, his name is Wei Xiaobao. He said that there is an old fellow in Tian Di Hui by the name of Eight-Arm Ape Xu Tianchuan, because of a dispute involving supporting Tang, supporting Gui, whatever, he killed your Mu Palace’s Bai Hansong. The Mu Family’s *Xiao Gongye* and Bai Hanfeng are unwilling to let the matter rest, but the dead can’t come back to life. Without any other option, that Wei Xiaobao came and asked me to rescue the three of you, to compensate the Mu Palace, giving careful consideration to the *yi qi* between the two sides.”

Wu Lishen was fully aware of the dispute with Tian Di Hui, his suspicion gone instantly, he shook his head continuously, and then nodded, saying, “So that’s how it is. Just now *Zaixia* said some offensive words, I have offended you.”

“You are too kind!” Wei Xiaobao said, “It’s just that we must think of an ingenious way of escaping from the Palace.”

“Whatever way Gui Gonggong thought must be ingenious,” Liu Yizhou said, “We will obey your instructions.”

Wei Xiaobao mused, “I haven’t thought of any plan.” He asked Wu Lishen, “What strategy does Wu *Laoyezi* have?”

“There are too many dog Imperial Bodyguards in the Palace,” Wu Lishen said, “We can’t break out in the daytime, we’ll wait until night, you try to cut off the ox tendon binding our hands and feet, let us rush out and kill the enemy under the darkness.”

“This plan is wonderful,” Wei Xiaobao said, “But I am afraid it is not extremely certain.” He paced back and forth in the room, pondering the best solution.

Ao Biao said, “We’d better just make a dash out, if we fail, the worst that can happen is we die anyway.”

“Ao *Shige*,” Liu Yizhou said, “Don’t interrupt Gui Gonggong’s train of thought.” Ao Biao glared angrily at him.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “It would be best to use some drug; if the Imperial Bodyguards are drugged, I don’t have to harm any human life.” Walking out the room, he said to Zhang Kangnian, “Zhang *Dage*, I want to use some drug, I wonder if you could fix some for me immediately?”

“Sure, sure,” Zhang Kangnian said with a laugh, “Zhao *Er Ge* [second older brother] has some ready-made knockout drug; I’ll get it right away.”

“Zhao *Er Ge* has some ready-made knockout drug?” Wei

Xiaobao asked, “Whatever for?”

Lowering his voice, Zhang Kangnian said, “Not concealing anything from Gui Gonggong; the day before yesterday Deputy Chief Rui ordered us to arrest somebody, he told us to do it quietly, not to make it known publicly. This man’s martial art skill was profound, we were afraid that to fight him openly with saber and spear would mean sacrificing a lot of human lives; not only that, we would not be able to capture him alive, so Zhao *Er Ge* fixed some knockout drug to do the trick.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “Unable to defeat others, you use a dirty trick.” He asked, “Was it a great success?”

“Stretch a hand and grab it,” Zhang Kangnian replied.

Hearing it was Rui Dong who sent them on a mission, Wei Xiaobao probed further, “Who was it that you were supposed to arrest? What did he violate?”

“It was the Commander of the Bordered Red Banner Hochabo,” Zhang Kangnian replied, “I heard he offended the Empress Dowager. After the Deputy Chief Rui arrested him, he forced Hochabo to hand over some kind of scripture; afterwards, he pasted a sheet of mulberry bark paper on his mouth and nose, and thus suffocated him to his death.”

Hearing this, Wei Xiaobao was secretly terrified, “Turns out that old wh0re is after that Forty-two-chapter Sutra again. After obtaining the sutra, why didn’t Rui Dong give it to the old wh0re immediately, but hid it on his body instead? Was he thinking of embezzling it for himself?” But then he immediately thought that in no way would Rui Dong dare to embezzle the sutra for himself. “Ah, right, as soon as the old wh0re saw Rui Dong, she did not have enough time to inquire about the sutra, because she immediately sent him out to kill me. Rui Dong was thinking of killing *laozi* first before handing over the sutra. In the end, it turned into the opera of the ‘Battle of Chang Ban Po’

[Long Sloping Hillside], in which that clown [lit. Little Flowery Face] named Xiahou-something died and lost his treasured sword. Doesn't that turn *laozi* into Zhao Zilong of Changsan, who charged in and out of enemy formations seven times in succession?”[30] He casually asked, “What kind of sutra was that? It sounds very important.”

“We do not know,” Zhang Kangnian replied, “Let me go get the knockout drug.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “I’ll have to bother you some more: please tell the Catering Department to deliver two tables of top-notch feast here. I want to invite all brothers for a banquet.”

Zhang Kangnian happily said, “Gonggong wants to reward us with food and wine. As long as we follow Gonggong, we won’t have to worry about the lack of food and drink for the rest of our lives.”

Not too long afterwards, Zhang Kangnian was back with the knockout drug. It was packaged in a very large bundle, perhaps it was more than half a catty. In a low voice he said, “This large bundle of drug is enough to put several hundred people to sleep. For only one person, take a little bit with a finger nail like this, mix it with tea or wine, it should be enough.” He then ordered the Imperial Bodyguards to move the table and arrange the stools, telling them it was Gui Gonggong who bestow them the wine. The Imperial Bodyguards were delighted, they busily do the bidding.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Set the banquet in the prisoner room. We are having a good time, let those three damn assassins watch and be jealous, I want them to drool.”

The banquet table set up, the eunuch manager of the imperial kitchen, leading several little eunuchs and ‘sula’ [Book note: The low-level, odd jobs servants in the Qing Palace were called ‘sula’ in the Manchu dialect.] arrived, carrying boxes of food on

shoulder poles. They set the dishes and wine pots on the table.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “You, three rebellious thieves, have committed treason and heresy, your death is imminent, yet you still reluctant to admit your mistake. Right now you may watch your masters eating and drinking, if you can’t endure your appetite, just bark like a dog, *laoye* will reward you with a piece of meat.” The crowd of Imperial Bodyguards burst out in laughter.

“Dog Imperial Bodyguards, stinky eunuch,” Wu Lishen cursed, “Our Ping Xi Wang will soon dispatch troops from Yunnan all the way to attack Beijing, he will seize all of you, Imperial Bodyguards and a bunch of eunuchs, and will throw you into the river to feed the tortoises.”

Wei Xiaobao’s right hand entered his pocket, his palm grabbed half a handful of knockout drug. With his left hand he picked up the wine pot, and walked toward Wu Lishen. Raising the wine pot he laughed and said, “Rebellious thieve, do you want to drink wine?”

Wu Lishen did not understand Wei Xiaobao’s intention, he said loudly, “Drink or not, I don’t care! When Ping Xi Wang’s troops arrive, it will be difficult for you, little eunuch, to escape alive.”

With a cold laugh Wei Xiaobao said, “That’s not necessarily true!” Raising the wine pot high, he tossed his head backward, and poured the wine from high in the air into his open wide mouth. He swallowed a mouthful of wine and praised, “Nice wine!” He positioned the wine pot in his left hand level with his chest and pushed the pot’s lid aside with his right-hand’s forefinger, and then spilled the knockout drug in the palm of his right hand into the pot, and quickly pushed the lid back. He raised the pot in his left hand again, and shook it continuously in the air, while saying with a laugh, “Good rebellious thieve, death is near at hand, you still talk nonsense.” When he dropped the knockout drug into the pot, his body was covering

the wine pot; other than Wu Lishen, nobody else saw him doing it. He shook the wine pot to mix the knockout drug with the wine.

Wu Lishen looked at Wei Xiaobao’s eyes; he understood immediately, and was secretly delighted. With a loud voice he said, “Real man looks at death in the eye, if I open my mouth to beg forgiveness, I am not a real man. Just give that pot of wine to me, *laozi* will drink it without a moment’s hesitation.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "You want to drink wine, I am not going to give you any, ha ha, ha ha!" Turning around, he walked back to the banquet table and filled the Imperial Bodyguards' cups to the brim.

Zhang Kangnian and the guards all stood up, saying, "We don't dare; how can we let Gonggong pour the wine?"

"We are all brothers," Wei Xiaobao said, "Why be so polite?" Raising his own cup, he said, "Please, please!"

The Imperial Bodyguards were just about to drink the wine when suddenly there was a shout from the outside, "The Empress Dowager summons Xiao Guizi. Is Xiao Guizi here?"

Wei Xiaobao was shocked. "In here!" he replied, and put the wine cup down. He thought, "The old wh0re is looking for me? What does she want?" as he walked outside to meet the newcomers. He saw four eunuchs; the leader was a big man with both his chest and belly sticking out, he looked rather impressive. Wei Xiaobao kneeled down immediately and said, "Servant Xiao Guizi receives the imperial decree."

The eunuch said, "The Empress Dowager has something important for you; you are to report to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful immediately."

"Yes, yes," Wei Xiaobao replied. He stood up, while thinking, "The drugged wine is already poured. As soon as I leave, naturally the Imperial Bodyguards will drink it immediately, then

my trickery will be exposed. Nothing I can do about it. But I must not go to Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful. Do you think Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful is Lovely Spring Courtyard? Where the old wh0re invites moneybags, young and old?" Right now he had numerous Imperial Bodyguards by his side, so he was not afraid at all. He laughed and asked, "Gonggong, what's your honorable surname? How come we have never met before?"

"Humph!" the eunuch snorted; he said, "My name is Dong Jinkui. Let's go now. The Empress Dowager is waiting, we have been looking for you for half of the day!"

Wei Xiaobao stepped forward and got hold of the eunuch's wrist, saying, "Dong Gonggong, come and see something interesting." He pulled the eunuch toward the inside room.

Hearing it was something interesting, Dong Jinkui followed him inside. But as he entered the inner hall, he saw two banquet tables. "Good!" he said in a loud voice, "You live a very happy and prosperous life. Xiao Guizi, the Empress Dowager appointed you to be in charge of the Catering Department, yet you use your official authority for private interest, you are squandering the Empress Dowager and His Majesty's money."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "These Imperial Bodyguards brothers have rendered great service by capturing the thieves, His Majesty ordered me to reward all of them, from top to bottom. Come, come, come, Dong Gonggong, and these three Gonggong, please sit down and drink a cup."

Dong Jinkui shook his head and said, "I don't drink! The Empress Dowager summons you, why don't you quickly go?"

Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "These Imperial Bodyguards officers are all good friends, if you do not even want to drink a cup with them, you will look down on them too much."

"I don't drink wine," Dong Jinkui said.

Wei Xiaobao turned to Zhang Kangnian and gave him a wink; he said, "Zhang *Dage*, this Dong Gonggong's arrogance is not small, he does not want to drink with us."

Zhang Kangnian raised a cup and pushed it toward Dong Jinkui's hand; he said with a laugh, "Dong Gonggong, we all enjoy this reward together." Dong Jinkui did not have any choice, he dried up a cup.

"Now that's what I call a good friend," Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "The other three Gonggong must also drink a cup." The three eunuchs received three cups from the Imperial Bodyguards' hands, they also drank the wine.

"Good!" Wei Xiaobao said, "Now everybody accompany them by drinking a cup." He poured wine into four more empty cups. The Imperial Bodyguards raised their cups and drank their wine.

When raising his cup, Wei Xiaobao used the sleeve of his left hand to cover the wine cup, when he tossed the cup, he poured the wine into his sleeve. Afraid that one cup was not potent enough, he wanted to pour another cup for everybody, but an Imperial Bodyguard took the wine pot from him and said, "Let me pour!"

Dong Jinkui frowned and said, "Gui Gonggong, when we heard the Empress Dowager summons us, everybody would be on our feet and rush to answer. Why do you leisurely mind your own business by drinking wine? Aren't you being too disrespectful?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Of course I have my reason. Come, come, come, everybody drink another cup, and then I'll explain."

Zhang Kangnian raised his cup toward Dong Jinkui and said, "Dong Gonggong, please."

"I don't have time to drink wine," Dong Jinkui said, but when he said that, his body swayed slightly.

Wei Xiaobao knew the knockout drug in Dong Jinkui's stomach was about to take effect; he stooped down suddenly and cried out, "Aiyo, my tummy hurts!"

The Imperial Bodyguards felt dizzy; someone cried out, "What happened? Something's wrong with the wine!"

Wei Xiaobao shouted angrily, "Dong Gonggong, you received order from the Empress Dowager to reward us with poisonous wine, didn't you? Why did you put poison in the wine?"

Dong Jinkui was greatly shocked, with a trembling voice he said, "There ... there's no such thing."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Your method is quite ruthless, you dare to poison the wine? Brothers, let us stake our lives to fight him."

The Imperial Bodyguards were dizzy and light-headed, they were already at the brink of losing their consciousness. 'Crash! Bang!' Two of the eunuchs were already unable to withstand the power of the drug, they fell down first, followed by Dong Jinkui, Zhang Kangnian, the rest of the Imperial Bodyguards and the remaining eunuch crashed down one after another onto the tables and the chairs; it was very chaotic.

Wei Xiaobao rushed forward and landed a kick on Dong Jinkui's body. "Ugh!" Dong Jinkui grunted, his hands and feet twitched, but he was unable to open his eyes. Wei Xiaobao was ecstatic; he rushed to close the door first, and then pulling his dagger, he stabbed Dong Jinkui and the three eunuchs on the chest. "Ah!" Liu Yizhou cried out in great surprise. Wei Xiaobao used the dagger to cut off the ox tendon binding Wu Lishen, Liu Yizhou and Ao Biao's hands and feet. His dagger could cut iron like cutting mud, it cut the ox tendon like cutting noodles. Wu Lishen and the others, three people's martial art skill was not weak, especially Wu Lishen whose skill was very profound. Although they were tortured, it was no more than skin and flesh wound, their muscles and bones were not harmed at all.

"Gui Gonggong," Liu Yizhou said, "How ... how are we going to go out?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Wu *Laoyezi*, Ao *Shixiong*, find Imperial Bodyguards whose statures are similar to yours, wear their uniforms. Liu *Shixiong*, you don't have any facial hair, you may disguise yourself as an eunuch, take this surnamed Dong's clothing."

"Can I disguise myself as an Imperial Bodyguard?" Liu Yizhou asked.

"No, can't do! You must dress as an eunuch," Wei Xiaobao said. Liu Yizhou did not dare to argue, he simply nodded. The three of them quickly changed their clothes.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Come with me. No matter who talk with you, just act dumb, do not reply anything." From his pocket he took out the dissolving powder. He pulled Dong Jinkui's body to the corner of the room. Using his dagger, he stabbed several times on the upper and lower parts of the corpse, and then sprinkled some powder on each hole to dissolve the body quicker. Only then did he open the door and led the three people out.

Once they were out of the Imperial Bodyguard building, he closed the door behind him, and walked directly toward the Catering Department.

The Catering Department was located east of the Heavenly Purity Palace, it was very close to the Imperial Bodyguard building, so they arrived in almost no time at all. They saw Boss Qian had already been waiting respectfully, his men were carrying two big pigs, already washed out and very clean.

Wei Xiaobao's countenance sank, "Old Qian," he shouted harshly, "You are very unreasonable! I told you to bring several good pigs, not thin and dry like this, some old sows that look like they have given birth to seventeen, eighteen litters to

skimp on *Laozi*. You ... you ... damn it, do you still want to eat?"

As he prattled on, Boss Qian bowed down in fear and repeatedly said, "Yes!"

The eunuchs of the imperial kitchen saw that the two pigs Boss Qian brought were actually big and fat, but the details in which the goods was delivered was actually the only way the eunuch manager of the imperial kitchen took a cut. It did not matter if the cattle, sheep, chicken or duck you delivered was extremely superior, in the mouth of the eunuch manager of the imperial kitchen it all turned into a spoiled, low quality goods that even if it were given as alms to the beggars, nobody would want it. Only if the delivery was accompanied by a bag of money the spoiled, low quality goods would then turn into high-quality goods fit to be eaten by the Emperor or Empress Dowager. When the eunuchs heard Wei Xiaobao, it dawned on them what was going on; they echoed Wei Xiaobao, "Take them out! These two pigs are stinky and rotten, they are only good to be used as fertilizer in the vegetable garden."

Wei Xiaobao grew angrier, he waved his hand and said to Wu Lishen and the others, three people, "Imperial Bodyguard brothers and Gonggong, please escort this fellow out, kick them out of the Palace altogether and don't let them come back in."

Boss Qian did not know Wei Xiaobao's intention; showing his concern, he said, "Gonggong, please forgive me for this incident, *Xiao ... Xiaoren* will come back with fatter and bigger pigs, plus some meager ... meager gift for Gonggong. This time ... I am asking Gonggong to bear with me."

Wei Xiaobao said, "If I want pork, I will send someone to get you. Now go, get lost!"

Bowing deep, Boss Qian said, "Yes, yes!"

The eunuchs of the imperial kitchen looked at each other with a smirk on their faces, they thought, "If you have brought a

gift, naturally Gui Gonggong won't drive you away."

Wu Lishen, Liu Yizhou and Ao Biao, three people followed behind Boss Qian, busily pushing him out of the kitchen. Wei Xiaobao also went out after them. When they reached the corridor, he looked around and after ascertaining that nobody else was around, he said in low voice, "Qian *Laoxiong* [old brother], these three gentlemen are Mu Palace's heroes; the first one is none other than the renowned Shaking-head Lion Wu *Laoyezi*."

"Ah!" Qian Laoben exclaimed, "It's an honor to meet you at last," he said happily, "*Zaixia* did not turn my head to greet the three gentlemen, please do not hold it against me."

Hearing that he was Wei Xiaobao's companion, Wu Lishen was delighted, and said busily, "We are in a dangerous place, this ought to be so."

"Qian *Laoge* [old brother]," Wei Xiaobao said, "Please tell your honorable society's Wei *Xiangzhu* that *Lai Li Tou Xiao Sanzi* has accomplished the mission, please take these three good friends to see Mu Family's *Xiao Gongye* and Liu *Laoyezi*. As soon as these three friends left, the Palace will pursue the assassins immediately, you might not be able to enter the Palace anymore."

"Yes, yes," Qian Laoben said, "My humble society, from top to bottom, is highly indebted to Gonggong's kindness."

Wu Lishen asked, "So this Qian friend is from Tian Di Hui?"

"Exactly," Boss Qian replied.

The five of them quickly walked toward the Shen Wu Gate. The guards on the gate saw Wei Xiaobao and respectfully asked his well-being, "Gui Gonggong, how are you?"

"Everybody, how are you?" Wei Xiaobao replied. Although the Imperial Bodyguards did not recognize Wu Lishen and the

others, three people, seeing Wei Xiaobao was pulling Wu Lishen's right arm, nobody dared to ask anything.

The five of them left the Shen Wu Gate and walked several dozens more steps. Wei Xiaobao said, "*Zaixia* will have to return to the Palace, I'm sure we will meet again someday. You don't need to be overly courteous."

Wu Lishen said, "We do not dare to hope for repaying your kindness in saving our lives. Hereafter if Tian Di Hui has any urgent business, the Old Wu and Old Ao, master and disciple, will go through water and tread on fire without hesitation."

"I don't dare," Wei Xiaobao said. He saw that Liu Yizhou, who was walking ahead in big strides, turning his head to look at them, as if blaming Wu Lishen for not walking quicker; this place was not far from the Palace Gate, they were not out of danger yet.

Wei Xiaobao smiled slightly, and walked back toward the Shen Wu Gate. He said to the Imperial Bodyguards at the Gate, "That Gonggong is the Empress Dowager's trusted aide, he said he is being sent on mission by the Empress Dowager, he asked me to personally escort those few men out of the Palace. Damn it, don't they know the way out?"

"They are so arrogant!" the Imperial Bodyguards replied, "How can they dare to tire out Gui Gonggong? Who do they think they are? The Prince[31]?"

Another Imperial Bodyguard said, "Even the Prince will not ask Gui Gonggong to personally escort him out."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, "They are the Empress Dowager's envoy, they action is unfathomable, I have suspicion in my heart, but that eunuch showed me a decree in the Empress Dowager’s personal handwriting, so we as the servants won’t dare not to obey, right?”

“Yes, yes!” the Imperial Bodyguards replied, “What can we do about it?”

Wei Xiaobao returned to the Imperial Bodyguard building and saw everyone was still unconscious, nobody awoke yet. He scooped a pot of cold water and splashed it onto Zhang Kangnian’s head. Zhang Kangnian slowly woke up, he smiled and said. “Gui Gonggong, how could I be drunk that easily?” He was embarrassed as he sat up. As he saw the condition of the room, he was greatly shocked. “How … how … those assassins … are they gone?” he said with a trembling voice.

Wei Xiaobao said, “The Empress Dowager sent that surnamed Dong eunuch to drug us all, and took the three assassins away.”

The knockout drug was clearly coming from Zhang Kangnian who had personally fetched it and given it to Wei Xiaobao. When he heard this, he did not believe it the least bit, but the effect of the drug had not vanished completely, his mind was still muddled, he did not know how to reply.

“Zhang *Dage*,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Chief Dolong secretly told you to let the assassins out, didn’t he?”

Zhang Kangnian nodded. “Chief Dolong said that it was His Majesty’s secret order; after the assassins are released, we are to investigate who the rebellious thief boss is.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “That’s right. But when the assassins escape from the Palace, are the guards watching over them guilty or not?”

Zhang Kangnian was startled. “That … that … naturally we are guilty, but … but it was Chief Dolong himself who gave us the order. We are the subordinates, we only followed orders.”

“Did Chief Dolong give you any written order?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Zhang Kangnian was even more startled. “He … he did not,”

he replied, “He said it with his own mouth, why should … why should I need a written order? Chief Dolong said it was His Majesty’s order.”

“Did Chief Dolong show you His Majesty’s imperial edict in his own handwriting?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“No … he did not,” Zhang Kangnian’s voice trembled, “Could it be … could it be that Chief Dolong did not tell the truth?” His entire body trembled, his teeth chattered, making a ‘click, click’ noise.

“Not that he did not tell the truth,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I am only afraid Chief Dolong would not want to admit mistakes, at the last moment he might shift the blame on you; won’t that be terrible? Zhang *Dage*, why did His Majesty want to set the assassins free?”

Zhang Kangnian said, “Chief Dolong said that we want to extract the information on who is the mastermind behind this from the three assassins.”

“That is the truth,” Wei Xiaobao said, “It’s just that when the assassins escape from the Palace, and this matter is not investigated, even the assassins won’t believe it. And then the mastermind behind them could not be found. Perhaps His Majesty would execute several people and announce it publicly, so that the assassins won’t get suspicious.”

By saying this, Wei Xiaobao was not slandering the Emperor; Kangxi did order him to kill several Imperial Bodyguards to make the assassins believe him.

Zhang Kangnian was so frightened that he fell on his knees and cried out, “Gonggong, please save me!” While repeatedly kowtowed to Wei Xiaobao.

“Zhang *Dage* is overly courteous,” Wei Xiaobao said. He reached out to help him up, and said with a laugh, “We have some friends readily available to take the blame. We’ll shift the

blame onto those four eunuchs' heads. We'll say they used knockout drug to drug us all and set the assassins free; won't that clear you from responsibility? When His Majesty hears that these four eunuchs were sent by the Empress Dowager, naturally he won't investigate it further. His Majesty did not really want to kill you, as long as there is someone to take the blame, we will cover up this matter of escaping assassins. His Majesty may even reward you."

Zhang Kangnian was ecstatic, "Wonderful, wonderful!" he cried out, "Thank you Gonggong, for your kindness in saving my life."

Wei Xiaobao mused, "Even if I did not save your life, but by not killing you with a stab when you were unconscious, I have actually shown you mercy. With his own golden mouth the Emperor has ordered me to kill several Imperial Bodyguards." He said, "Let us quickly awaken the brothers, we'll tell them that those four eunuchs have come to set the assassins free."

"Yes, yes!" Zhang Kangnian replied, yet he was still unsure whether he could really escape the responsibility. In his frightened state, his limbs felt weak. He scooped up some cold water and revived the Imperial Bodyguards.

When they all heard that eunuch Dong Jinkui had drugged them, killed the other three eunuchs, and rescued the three assassins, they all broke into cursing and swearing. But in their hearts they all wondered, "Why did the Empress Dowager want to release the assassins? Could it be that those assassins were sent by the Empress Dowager?" But since it involved the Empress Dowager, they only dared to ponder it in their hearts, nobody dared to voice their doubt publicly. By this time Dong Jinkui's body, as well as his clothes, had already vanished completely, they all assumed that he had led the assassins out of the Palace.

Wei Xiaobao returned to his own residence. As soon as he

entered the inner room, Mu Jianping busily asked, "Gui *Dage*, do you have any news?"

"Gui *Dage* does not have any news," Wei Xiaobao replied, "But Good *Gege* has some."

Mu Jianping smiled and said, "It's not me who is anxious about the news. The one who is anxious is the one who should call you Good *Gege*."

A burst of redness appeared on Fang Yi's face. "Good *Xiongdi*[32]!" she said in a low voice, "You are younger than I am, I'll just call you Good *Xiongdi*, is that alright?"

Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, "My good wife has turned into my good *Jiejie*[33], in an instant the hen has turned into a duck. It's alright. I have rescued him!"

Fang Yi sat up abruptly. With a trembling voice she said, "You ... did you say my Liu *Shige* has been rescued out?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "A real man gave his words, some horses cannot chase it. I promised you I would rescue him, naturally I did."

"How ... how did you save him?" Fang Yi asked.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "A recluse sage possesses a brilliant scheme. Next time you see your *Shige*, he can tell you in person."

Fang Yi heaved a deep sigh, she raised her head toward the ceiling and said, "Thank the Heaven and thank the Earth, it is indeed Bodhisattva's blessing."

Seeing Fang Yi's expression, which clearly showed her delight from the bottom of her heart, Wei Xiaobao was enraged, he snorted softly, and no longer said anything.

Mu Jianping said, "*Shijie*, you thank the Heaven and thank the

Earth, and thank Bodhisattva, how come you did not thank the Good *Xiongdi*?"

Fang Yi said, "Good *Xiongdi*'s great benevolence and kindness cannot be repaid by simply saying one 'thank you'."

Listening to her, Wei Xiaobao's cheerful mood returned; "You don't need to repay me," he said.

"Good *Xiongdi*, did Liu *Shige* say anything?" Fang Yi asked.

"He did not say much," Wei Xiaobao replied, "He only asked me to save him."

"Um, did he ask about us?" Fang Yi asked.

Wei Xiaobao cocked his head to think, then he said, "He did not. I told him that you are in a very safe place, and that he doesn't have to worry, soon I may send you out to meet him."

Fang Yi nodded. "Yes!" she said. Suddenly two lines of tears flowing down her cheeks.

"*Shijie*," Mu Jianping said, "Why are you crying?"

Fang Yi said with a sob, "I ... I am so happy in my heart."

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "Damn it, for that pretty boy[34] Liu Yizhou you are this happy, *laozi* does not like to look at this tumultuous wave too much. Xiao Xuanzi told me to investigate the mastermind behind the assassination attempt, I'd better go out to fool around a little bit, then come back to report to him."

Leaving the Palace immediately, he strolled leisurely around the Heavenly Bridge area.

Chapter 14
Exiles willing to perish for the hatred of a nation, seasons change the grieve for suffering people
(Translated by Foxs)

The scholar rose upward, suddenly he felt his left ankle was grabbed. Swiftly he moved his right foot to kick Chen Jinnan's face. Chen Jinnan picked up a small table beside him and raised it to block. 'Crash!' the mahogany table was smashed.

The area nearby the Heavenly Bridge of Beijing was full of peddlers selling all kinds of goods and street performers, it was

also the place where Jianghu wanderers congregate. Wei Xiaobao had not come near the area when he saw twenty officers from the *yamen* with two bailiffs on the lead, dragging an iron chain, in which five shabby-clothed peddlers were locked. The officers were carrying seven or eight poles made of straw bundled together, the straw poles were full of candied fruits on sticks [bing tang hu lu, see previous chapter], so those five peddlers were obviously selling candied fruits.

Wei Xiaobao's heart was moved, he dodged to the side; as he watched the five peddlers locked by the officers passed by, he heard from among the crowd an old man said with a sigh, "These years, even selling candied fruits is violating the law of heavens."

Wei Xiaobao was just about to inquire when suddenly he heard a cough, someone was coming close to him, the man had bent waist and hunched back, all the hair on his head was white, he was none other than the Eight-Armed Ape Xu Tianchuan. He signaled Wei Xiaobao with his eyes, and turned around to leave. Wei Xiaobao followed behind him. When they were in a secluded spot, Xu Tianchuan said, "Wei *Xiangzhu*, great news!"

Wei Xiaobao smiled slightly, he thought, "So you knew about I rescued Wu Lishen and the others out." He said, "It was nothing."

Xu Tianchuan stared at him. "Nothing?" he said, "*Zongduozhu* is here!"

Wei Xiaobao was startled, "My … my Shifu is here?" he stammered.

"Exactly," Xu Tianchuan said, "He arrived last night, he wanted me to try to contact Wei *Xiangzhu*, and have you meet the Senior immediately."

"Yes, yes!" Wei Xiaobao said. He had not seen his Shifu for

more than half a year, and had not practiced martial art at all. When Shifu saw him, he might inquire the progress of Wei Xiaobao's training, and he would have had to turn in a blank exam paper, how would it be good? Trying to stall, he said, "I am on an errand from the Emperor, I must return and report immediately. Let me finish this mission, and then I'll see Shifu."

Xu Tianchuan said, "*Zongduozhu* instructed me that he cannot stay in Beijing for long, he is asking Wei *Xiangzhu* to see him immediately no matter what."

Seeing he could not make any more excuses, Wei Xiaobao did not have any choice but to brace himself and follow behind Xu Tianchuan toward Tian Di Hui's temporary lodging. He mused, "If only I knew, these days I would simply stay inside the Palace and do not go out. Shifu can't possibly come into the Palace and grab me out."

Before they even entered the alley, he had already seen Tian Di Hui brethrens scattered around on the side of the street and at the mouth of the alley, acting as lookouts for their *Zongduozhu*. As he entered the building, he saw more people standing on guard by the doors.

When they reached the rear hall, he saw Chen Jinnan was sitting in the middle, talking to Li Lishi, Guan Anji, Fan Gang, Priest Xuanzhen, Qi Biaoqing, and the others. Wei Xiaobao rushed forward and kneeled down on the floor, calling out, "Shifu, you, Senior have arrived, now you may bring your disciple to a stop."

"Good, good, good child," Chen Jinnan said with a laugh, "Everybody praises you very much."

Wei Xiaobao stood up; seeing his Shifu's expression was very warm, half of the load in his heart was gone. "Shifu, are you well?" he asked.

Chen Jinnan smiled and said, "I am very well. How is your

martial art training? Is there any area which is not clear to you?”

Wei Xiaobao had already considered how he was going to offer excuses when his Shifu investigate his martial art training. Shifu was very astute, he would not be easily fooled, Wei Xiaobao would have to change according to the situation; he said, “There are a lot of areas not clear to me, I was hoping Shifu would come so I could ask Shifu for directions.”

Chen Jinnan smiled and said, “Very good, this time I want to stay with you for a few days so that I can instruct you well.”

As he was saying this, the brother guarding the gate hurried came in, bowed and said, “Reporting to *Zongduozhu*: some people are paying a visit, they say they are from Mu Palace of Yunnan, Mu Jiansheng and Liu Dahong.”

Chen Jinnan was greatly delighted; he stood up and said, “Let’s greet them quickly.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Disciple has not changed my attire, it’s rather inconvenient to meet them.”

“You’re right,” Chen Jinnan said, “Wait for me in the back.”

Tian Di Hui people flocked out to greet the guests, Wei Xiaobao turned around toward the back of the hall, pulled a chair, and sat down.

Before long, he heard Liu Dahong’s loud and clear laughter, saying, “*Zaixia*’s lifelong aspiration is to see the world-famous Chen *Zongduozhu*. Today my desire is fulfilled, I am truly delighted.”

Chen Jinnan said, “To received Old Hero Liu’s respected affection, *Zaixia* is ashamed and dare not accept the honor.” They were entering the hall as they talked, and sat in their respective places as guests and hosts.

Mu Jiansheng said, “Is your honorable Society’s Wei *Xiangzhu*

not here? *Zaixia* wants to personally thank him. Not one in my humble home, from top to bottom, does not appreciate Wei *Xiangzhu*'s great benevolence and kindness."

Chen Jinnan had not known the reason, he was puzzled. "Wei Xiaobao is a very young child, *Xiao Gongye* holds him in such a high regard, you are praising the little kid too much."

Someone said with a loud voice, "*Zaixia*, master and disciple, along with this Liu Shizhi [martial nephew Liu], our lives are saved by Wei *Xiangzhu*. Wei *Xiangzhu*'s righteousness reaches the clouds and the sky. *Zaixia* has told your honorable Society's Qian Shifu, if honorable Society ever has any urgent business, the one surnamed Wu, master and disciple, will receive the orders any time." From his voice, Wei Xiaobao knew he was the 'Shaking Head Lion' Wu Lishen.

Chen Jinnan was still unclear, he asked, "Qian *Xiongdi*, what matter was that?"

Qian Laoben accompanied Wu Lishen and the other, three people, to Mu Jiansheng's residence, and was invited to enjoy meat and wine together with them. Afterwards, Mu Jiansheng and Liu Dahong personally took their people, asking Qian Laoben to lead the way, to Tian Di Hui's temporary lodging to express their gratitude. They did not expect *Zongduozhu* to be there. Presently, hearing Chen Jinnan's question, he briefly narrated what had happened. He said that Wei *Xiangzhu* had a good friend, who was an eunuch in the Qing Palace. This friend had accepted Wei *Xiangzhu*'s request, in spite of the danger, he had rescued Wu Lishen, three people, and had them out of the Palace.

As soon as Chen Jinnan heard the story, he knew that this good friend of Wei *Xiangzhu* was none other than Wei Xiaobao himself. He was very pleased, and said with a laugh, "*Xiao Gongye*, Liu *Laoyezi*, Wu *Dage*, the three of you are too polite. Our humble Society and your Mu Palace are working on a

common cause. When one of our own is in trouble, we ought to lend a hand, that is only proper; how can you consider it as some benevolence or kindness that needs to be repaid? That Wei Xiaobao is *Zaixia*'s young disciple, he is young and does not understand much, it's just that concerning *yi qi*, these two characters, he holds it in such a high regard …" Speaking to this point, he hesitated, "Xiaobao mingling in Qing Palace is actually a top secret, I hope he can pry into important classified information in the Palace to the benefit of the great undertaking of fighting the Qing restoring the Ming. Since he had accomplished this major mission, sooner or later this news will spread in the Jianghu. If I conceal it from the Mu Palace, it will mean I am not regarding them as friends."

Wu Lishen said, "We really want to see Wei *Xiangzhu* to express our gratitude in person."

Chen Jinnan laughed and said, "We are all good friends, although the implication of this matter will not be small, I can't conceal it from you. The one mingling in the Palace and became a little eunuch is my young disciple Wei Xiaobao himself. Xiaobao, come out and greet these Seniors."

From behind the wall of the hall Wei Xiaobao replied, "Yes!" He turned around and came out, cupping his fist to salute everybody.

Mu Jiansheng, Liu Dahong, Wu Lishen, and the others stood up simultaneously, they were greatly amazed. They did not expect Wei *Xiangzhu* to be a little eunuch. Wu Lishen, Ao Biao, Liu Yizhou, three people did not expect the little eunuch who saved their lives was Wei *Xiangzhu* of Tian Di Hui.

With a giggle Wei Xiaobao said to Wu Lishen, "Wu *Laoyezi*, just now in the imperial Palace, junior was telling you a fake name, would Senior please don't blame me."

Wu Lishen said, "We were in a dangerous place, it ought to be

so. I was just talking to Ao Biao, that young hero handles the matter neatly, he has guts, he has lofty quality, he is truly an extraordinary character; how can there be such distinguished person in the Tatars' womb? We were feeling strange. Turns out he is a *Xiangzhu* of Tian Di Hui. That's … hey, hey, no wonder, no wonder!" While saying that, he raised his thumb and did not stop shaking his head, his face showed his great admiration.

'Shaking Head Lion' Wu Lishen was Liu Dahong's younger martial brother, his reputation in Jianghu was quite resounding. Hearing him praising and commending his disciple, Chen Jinnan was greatly delighted. He laughed and said, "Wu *Xiong* should not praise him too much, you are spoiling a little child."

Liu Dahong tossed his head backwards and laughed aloud, he said, "Chen *Zongduozhu*, you alone can occupy the most prestigious position in the Wulin world. Your martial art skill is profound, your reputation is resounding, Tian Di Hui prospers like this under your leadership, moreover, you have received such a disciple who adds glory to you."

Chen Jinnan cupped his fist and said, "Liu *Laoyezi*, by saying that, you are spoiling me."

Liu Dahong said, "Chen *Zongduozhu*, in all my life, the number of people whom the one surnamed Liu admires is not that many. Your elegant manner has made me admire you from the bottom of my heart. Someday when the Tatars have been driven away and our Fifth Prince Zhu ascends the dragon throne, there won't be a better person to be the Prime Minister other than yourself."

Chen Jinnan smiled slightly and said, "*Zaixia* is without virtue and without ability, how can I dare to accept such an eminent status?"

Qi Biaoqing interrupted, "Liu *Laoyezi*, after the Tatars are driven away, the Third Prince Zhu will become the Emperor, he

will restore the Great Ming. Everybody will definitely invite you, Senior, to hold the Grand Marshal position over the soldiers and horses."

Liu Dahong's eyes grew wide, he said, "You … what did you say? What Third Prince Zhu?"

Qi Biaoqing said, "When the Son of Heaven Longwu died for his country, he left behind the Third Prince Zhu, who is temporarily taking his residence in Taiwan. When our rivers and mountains are restored, naturally he will become the ruler."

Liu Dahong sprang up, he said fiercely, "This time Tian Dihui saved my *Shidi* [younger martial brother] and his disciple, we have received great favor from you. But about the legitimacy of the Great Ming's Son of Heaven, we must not make the least bit of mistake. Qi *Laodi* [old younger brother], the rightful Emperor ordained by heaven is clearly the Fifth Prince Zhu. Emperor Yongli was the rightful Emperor of the Great Ming, everybody in the world knows. You must not speak nonsense."

Chen Jinnan said, "Liu *Laoyezi*, please don't lose your temper. There is an important task in front of us, namely contacting Jianghu heroes; together we will oppose the Manchurian Qing. As for whether it will be the Third Prince Zhu or Fifth Prince Zhu who will become the Emperor in the future, it is still too early to mention, we should not harm the friendship between us. Naturally who will be the legitimate Emperor of the Great Ming is an important matter, but it is not for us as the officers to understand clearly for a short while. Come, come, come, let's have some wine, we'll drink and be merry first. As long as everybody work together for a common purpose, namely to wipe out the Tatars, what matter cannot be discussed slowly?"

Mu Jiansheng shook his head and said, "Chen *Zongduozhu* is wrong here! When the man is not just, the words will be unfavorable, when the words are unfavorable, the endeavor will not succeed. We are supporting the Fifth Prince Zhu not to

covet any glory and riches. If only Chen *Zongduozhu* understood the 'Mandate of Heaven', you would display utter loyalty to the Fifth Prince Zhu. We from the Mu Palace, from top to bottom, exhort Chen *Zongduozhu* to the greatest extend not to dare to disobey."

Chen Jinnan smiled and shook his head. "The sky cannot have two suns, the people cannot have two rulers. The Third Prince Zhu is alive and well in Taiwan. Taiwan's several hundred thousand troops, Tian Di Hui's more than a hundred thousand brothers, have already vowed loyalty and devotion to the Thirds Prince Zhu long ago."

With glowering eyes Liu Dahong loudly said, "Chen *Zongduozhu* is talking about several hundred thousand troops, more than a hundred thousand brothers, are you trying to rely on numbers to gain victory? But the millions of common people all know that the Son of Heaven Yongli perished for his country in Myanmar, he was the last emperor of the Great Ming. If we do not stand up for the Emperor Yongli's offspring, won't we let this Son of Heaven of the Great Ming, who had suffered untold hardships, and finally died a horrible death, down?" If his voice was originally sounded like a mighty bell, this loud speech was even more ear-splitting; but at the end of his speech, his heart ached and his voice unexpectedly turned hoarse.

Chen Jinnan's visit to Beijing this time was actually to learn more about Xu Tianchuan, who because of the dispute about the legitimacy of King Tang over King Gui had had a fight with the Bai Family Brothers of the Mu Palace, to such an extent as to accidentally kill Bai Hansong. Chen Jinnan was wholeheartedly devoted to the great undertaking of fighting the Qing, restoring the Ming. If the Tatars had not been driven out, yet there was a struggle between partners of the common goal, the great endeavor of fighting the Qing would face severe obstacle. Therefore, as soon as he learned about it, he rushed

in that same night from Henan to the Capital, hoping that by exercising extreme forbearance he would be able to obtain Mu Palace's forgiveness.

Upon his arrival in Beijing, he inquired right away and found out that the situation was much better than he anticipated. Tian Di Hui people in Beijing, under the leadership of Wei Xiaobao, had already met face to face with the head of the Mu Palace, neither side dishonor each other, there was hope yet for the better. After learning that Wei Xiaobao had saved Wu Lishen and the others, three people, he had no doubt that the unintentional killing of Ban Hansong by Xu Tianchuan would be settled. Unexpectedly Qi Biaoqing and Liu Dahong raised the subject of Tang-Gui's strive for the throne; the situation had once again become gradually tense [lit. 'with swords drawn and bows bent'].

Seeing Liu Dahong shedding tears when talking about Yongli losing his life for his country, he could not help his own heart from hurting; he said, "His Majesty Yongli died for his country, man and heaven were angered. The people of old said, 'Although Chu has only three households, when the Qin perishes, Chu must rise[35]', much less our Han people, who are a hundred times more numerous than the Tatars? Although the Tatars' power is great, our Han people must be 'millions of people all of one mind', there's no need to worry about not able to drive out the barbarians and restoring our rivers and mountains. Mu *Xiao Gongye*, Liu *Laoyezi*, our hatred is unavenged, why do we have a dispute among ourselves first? Today we make a plan, we ought to work together with our heart and soul, to kill that servant Wu Sangui, to avenge His Majesty Yongli, and to avenge Mu *Lao Gongye* [old duke Mu]."

Mu Jiansheng, Liu Dahong, Wu Lishen, and the others stood up and said together, "Very true, very true!" Some people had tears streaming down their faces, some people shook all over

their bodies, they were all overwhelmed with excitement.

Chen Jinnan continued, “In the end, whether it will be Long Wu or Yongli on the throne, we need not haggle over it now. Mu *Xiao Gongye*, Liu *Laoyezi*, heroes all over the world, whoever kill Wu Sangui, everybody will accept his orders!”

Mu Jiansheng’s father, Mu Tianbo, was killed by Wu Sangui; day and night he always considered how to kill Wu Sangui. Hearing Chen Jinnan, he was the first to call out, “Exactly, whoever kills Wu Sangui, the heroes all over the world will accept his orders.”

Chen Jinnan said, “Mu *Xiao Gongye*, my humble Society will make a pledge to your honorable Palace, if your honorable Palace’s hero kills Wu Sangui, Tian Di Hui, from top to bottom, will accept Mu Palace’s orders …”

Mu Jiansheng caught on and said, “If Tian Di Hui’s hero kills Wu Sangui, Mu Family of Yunnan, from Mu Jiansheng to the next in line, each and every one will accept Chen *Zongduozhu*’s orders!” The two of them stretched out their hands and ‘clap!’ they struck each other palm.

In Jianghu, an oath set up by three strikes of palms means neither side could renege on their words.

The two of them had just about to strike their palms the second time when suddenly from the roof came a long laugh and a voice said, “What if I killed Wu Sangui?”

From the east and west corners of the house some people shouted, “Who’s there?” Tian Di Hui people on guard duty rushed in to question the newcomer. There was a light clapping noise as someone leaped from the top of the house to the courtyard, the long window of the hall opened without any blowing wind, with speed beyond imagination, a dark green shadow flashed and entered the hall. From the east Guan Anji and Xu Tianchuan, from the west Liu Dahong and Wu Lishen,

simultaneously stretched out their arms to block. The man lightly leaped up and flew over the top of the four men's heads, and stood in front of Chen Jinnan and Mu Jiansheng.

With Guan, Xu, Li and Wu, four people cooperating, unexpectedly they still failed to block. The man's one foot barely landed on the floor, four people's fingers had already grabbed his body. Guan Anji grabbed his right shoulder, Xu Tianchuan grabbed his left flank, Liu Dahong pinched his left arm, Wu Lishen wrapped his arms around his lower back. All four had used high-level *qin na* technique.

The man did not resist at all, he laughed and said, "Is this the way Tian Di Hui and Mu Palace treat a good friend?"

They saw this man was wearing a dark green long robe, his age was about twenty five, twenty six, his stature was tall and slim, his appearance looked like a feeble scholar.

Chen Jinnan cupped his fist and said, "May I ask Sire's honored surname and great given name? Are you a good friend?"

The scholar said with a laugh, "If not a good friend, I won't be here." Suddenly he shrank his body as if he turned into a lump of meat. Guan Anji and the others, four people's grip suddenly loosened, they grabbed empty air. Amidst the ripping noise of the silk, a dark shadow rose upward. Chen Jinnan let out a long laugh as he grabbed with his right hand. The scholar escaped from the four people's clutch, but suddenly he felt his left ankle was grabbed as if it was bound with an iron hoop. Swiftly he moved his right foot to kick Chen Jinnan's face. It was a powerful kick; with one swift motion Chen Jinnan picked up a small table beside him and raised it to block. 'Crash!' the mahogany table was smashed. Chen Jinnan swung his right hand to throw him to the ground. The scholar's buttocks landed on the floor, but like a skater, his body slid several *zhang* on the dark green brick floor. Straightening up his waist, he stood up

leaning against the wall.

There was a piece of cloth remained in each of Guan Anji, Xu Tianchuan, Liu Dahong and Wu Lishen, four people's hands; it was the piece they pulled from the scholar's long gown. This turn of events was as swift as a falcon swooping on a rabbit, it was unbelievably fast and nimble. The six of them moved with such agility and clarity that the spectators on the side could see everything clearly, they all could not help but broke in loud cheer. The one cheered the loudest was still the 'Iron Back Blue Dragon' Liu Dahong, while Wu Lishen shook his head repeatedly; his face showed part ashamed, part full of admiration.

Chen Jinnan smiled and said, "Since Sire is a good friend, why don't you sit down and drink some tea?"

The scholar cupped his fist and said, "I'll drink the tea to thank you for your hospitality." With slow and measured steps he walked toward the row of chairs, cupped his fist toward everybody to salute, and then sat down on the last chair. If they did not see him demonstrating his agility just now, nobody would believe this gentle scholar possessed such a profound martial art skill.

Chen Jinnan laughed and said, "Sire, why too modest? Please take the seat of honor!"

The scholar shook his hand, "I don't dare, I don't dare!" he said, "That *Zaixia* can sit together with gentlemen, the heroes, is already the biggest good fortune in my entire life, how can I dare to take the seat of honor? Chen *Zongduozhu*, just now you asked my name, but I have not replied; it was very disrespectful. *Zaixia* surnamed Li, my given name is Xihua."

When Chen Jinnan, Liu Dahong and the others heard him announcing his name, they all thought, "I have never heard of Li Xihua in Wulin world, most probably it's a fictitious name. But

among the young generation heroes, I have never heard someone with such excellent martial art skill either."

Chen Jinnan said, "*Zaixia* is ignorant and inexperienced. That there is such excellent hero in Jianghu, unexpectedly I have not heard, I am indeed ashamed."

Li Xihua laughed aloud and said, "People say that Chen *Zongduozhu* of Tian Di Hui treats people with sincerity, and sure enough, it is a fully justified reputation. When you heard my lowly name, if you had said, 'It's an honor to meet you at last', then unavoidably in my heart I would have a thirty percent lack of respect. *Zaixia* has just made my debut[36], I have not made the least bit of name in Jianghu. Even I won't greet myself with 'It's an honor to meet you at last', much less other people? Ha ha, ha ha ...!"

Chen Jinnan smiled and said, "Now that we meet, Li *Xiong*'s great name will spread throughout the Jianghu; after this, whoever meet Li *Xiong* will have to greet you with 'It's an honor to meet you at last'!" Indeed it was the highest praise, everybody could hear it. Four high-level martial art experts from Tian Di Hui and Mu Palace unexpectedly failed to block and hold him down. Chen Jinnan exchanged two moves with him, but he barely gained the upper hand. In a matter of days everybody near and far would naturally hear about such skill.

Li Xihua shook his hand and said, "Not so, the style *Zaixia* displayed just now was no more than minor skill, unavoidably it is considered somewhat heretical. This old gentleman used 'Claw Appears from the Cloud', he grabbed my arm until it nearly broke. This bearded friend who loves to shake his head wrapped his arms around my waist, presumably it was the move 'Seizing-Rabbit Hand', his grab made me neither cry nor laugh. This white-bearded grandpa used the moved ‘Ape Fetches the Peach’, he really grabbed my flank as if it was a

Pantao[37], he grabbed so firmly and was not willing to release again. This long-bearded friend used the technique … um, um, it was a very ingenious move, wasn't it the 'Cheng Huang[38] Pulls Little Demon'?"

Guan Anji raised his left thumb, acknowledging that he was right. Actually, the move was called the 'Little Demon Pulls Cheng Huang'; by reversing the name, *i.e.* calling himself 'liitle demon', he was being modest.

From the time Guan Anji and the others, four people, made their move together to grab his body to the time he struggled free and leaped was only a moment, yet he unexpectedly was able to name the moves these four people had used without the slightest mistake; apparently his knowledge and experience was above his martial art skill.

Liu Dahong said, "Li *Xiong*, you skill is profound, your insight is even more profound."

Li Xihua shook his hand and said, "*Laoyezi* praises me too much. The moves the four gentlemen used on my body, any one of those is able to take my life. But the four gentlemen were careful not to overdo it, hence did not harm *Zaixia* the slightest bit. The four Seniors were being lenient, *Zaixia* is very grateful."

Liu Dahong and the others were very pleased in their hearts. Each one of the four moves 'Claw Appears from the Cloud', 'Seizing-Rabbit Hand', 'Ape Fetches the Peach' and 'Little Demon Pulls Cheng Huang' could turn into extremely fierce killer strike just by adding a little bit more force to it. By pointing out this fact, Li Xihua had considerably increased the four people's face.

Chen Jinnan said, "Li *Xiong* has honored us with your presence, I wonder what instruction do you have for me?"

"I am here to admit my guilt first," Li Xihua replied, "*Zaixia*

always admires Chen *Zongduozhu*. This time, quite by accident, I learned about Chen *Zongduozhu*'s arrival in Beijing. No matter what, I have to come to express my admiration. It's just that I do not know anybody who would present me to you. Without any better option, I took the liberty to come uninvited, eavesdropping the gentlemen's conversation on the rooftop. *Zaixia* hates that traitor Wu Sangui to the bones, I wish to dismember his body into ten thousand pieces, thus I could not bear not to open my mouth. I hope gentlemen would forgive me." While saying that, he stood up and bowed to salute.

Everybody also stood up simultaneously to return the salute. Several leaders of Tian Di Hui and Mu Palace introduced themselves. Although Wei Xiaobao was a Tian Di Hui leader, and presently his rank was second only to Chen Jinnan, but since all along Li Xihua's gaze had never landed on his face, Wei Xiaobao did not say anything.

Mu Jiansheng said, "Since Sire is the enemy of that thief Wu, we share a common enemy, which means we are of the same principle; there is no harm in us joining hands, in scheming together to punish this big traitor."

"Absolutely, absolutely," Li Xihua said, "Just now *Xiao Gongye* and Chen *Zongduozhu* were making an oath by striking your palms three times, but *Zaixia* brazenly interrupted it. After the two gentlemen finished the three strikes, may *Zaixia* also strike your palms three times?"

Liu Dahong said, "Sire is saying that if you killed Wu Sangui, all heroes and warriors of Tian Di Hui and Mu Palace should accept your orders?"

"I absolutely do not dare," Li Xihua said, "*Zaixia* is just a kid of younger generation, I will be perfectly contented to follow the heroes here; how can I dare to say I want to hold command over all of you?"

Liu Dahong nodded and said, "In that case, in Sire's mind, which one is the Late Emperor's legitimate successor to the throne of the Great Ming, Longwu or Yongli?"

In the past, Liu Dahong followed Emperor Yongli and Mu Tianbo fled to the southwest, entering Myanmar from Yunnan, experiencing inexhaustible hardships and perils; the result was Yongli was still killed by Wu Sangui. For this reason he made a blood oath to assist Yongli's descendant to ascend the dragon throne. In general, Chen Jinnan was more thoughtful toward their goal, he was unwilling to let internal strife damage their mission, but unexpectedly this hot-blooded old hero could not forget this matter.

Li Xihua said, "*Zaixia* has something that might be offensive to you, I am asking everybody's forgiveness first."

Liu Dahong's countenance changed slightly; he blurted out, "Sire is King Lu's former subordinate?" After Ming Dynasty's Emperor Chongzhen died, independent resistance against the Qing arose in various regions. There was King Fu, and then King Tang, King Lu and King Gui. As soon as Liu Dahong said that, he realized he was speaking incorrectly. Looking at Li Xihua's age, he was most likely born after the Qing troops entered the pass, so he could not possibly be King Lu's former subordinate. He asked, "Was Sire's former generation King Lu's former subordinate?"

Li Xihua did not answer his inquiry, he said, "When the Tatars are driven out in the future, any descendant of Chongzhen, King Fu, King Tang, King Lu and King Gui could become the emperor. Actually, as long as he is a Han, who cannot be the Emperor? Why can't Mu *Xiao Gongye* or Liu *Laoyezi* be the Emperor? Zheng *Wangye* from Taiwan, even Chen *Zongduozhu* himself, not necessarily cannot be the Emperor. When the Great Ming's *Taizu Huangdi* [founder emperor] drove out Mongolian Emperor, he did not ask any descendant of the Song Dynasty's

Zhao family to be the Emperor, but he himself ascended the great throne, yet everybody was delighted and sincerely willing to accept him."

Nobody had ever heard such reasoning before, without exception their countenance changed.

Liu Dahong slapped a small table by his side with his right hand, "Your speech can be considered treason and heresy," he said in stern voice, "We are the remnant of the Great Ming, lone officials and unfilial sons; we only strive to revive the Ming Dynasty, how can we store this kind of ambition of the wild wolves in our hearts?"

Li Xihua was not angry, he showed a faint smile and said, “Liu *Laoyezi*, there is one thing Junior does not understand, I’d like to consult you about something we have just talked about. During the last years of the Great Ming, the Mongolian Tatars took possession of our Han people’s beautiful rivers and mountains, our Great Ming’s Emperor Hongwu rose to the dragon throne by popular support. After the Tatars were driven out, why didn’t he set up a descendant from Zhao family to be the Emperor?”

“Humph,” Liu Dahong snorted and said, “Zhao family descendants were already exhausted; these rivers and mountains were won by *Taizu Huangdi* with bloody battle, naturally he could not possibly pass it on to the Zhao family? Moreover, in the driving out the Tatars, the Zhao family descendants did not have any merit. Even if *Taizu Huangdi* was willing to hand it over, the common people of the world, along with all the generals and soldiers would definitely not want to accept.”

“That’s exactly right,” Li Xihua said, “Whether the descendants of the Zhu family will have merit in the future or not, at present nobody knows. If they make major contribution, everybody will endorse them as the leader, then other people will not be able

to snatch away the throne. But if they do not make any contribution, even if they ascend onto the dragon court, I am afraid their position will not be steady. Liu *Laoyezi*, the undertaking of fighting the Qing is very complicated, there are things that need to be done quickly, there are things that have to be done slowly. Killing Wu Sangui needs to be done quickly, setting up the new emperor can be done slowly."

Liu Dahong was agape and tongue-tied, he was unable to answer. "What quickly or slowly?" he muttered, "I want everything to be done quickly; I wish everything is already accomplished, only then would it be good."

Li Xihua said, "Killing Wu Sangui must be done quickly, because that traitor Wu is already old. If we don't kill him soon, he might die of old age, won't it be a lifelong regret to people of the world with lofty ideals? Setting up the new ruler is a matter we need to address after the Tatars are driven out. My concern is that we are not able to defeat the Tatars. As for setting up learned and virtuous lord, we can always find one."

Observing his assurance and composure, and hearing his sensible and reasonable speech, Chen Jinnan was full of admiration. "Li *Xiong*," he said, "What you said is very reasonable, but on how we are going to assassinate Wu Sangui, I want to hear Li *Xiong*'s well-informed opinion."

"I don't dare," Li Xihua said, "Junior was about to ask everybody's advice."

Mu Jiansheng said, "What brilliant idea does Chen *Zongduozhu* have?"

"In *Zaixia*'s opinion," Chen Jinnan said, "That traitor Wu's sin is too great, just by killing him absolutely will not make up for his crime. We must make him losing his standing, his entire family, old and young, must be killed, not a blade of grass must be spared, even the troops under his command who followed

him breaking the law and committing crimes must be eliminated in one stroke, and thus the hatred in millions of common people's hearts will be appeased."

Liu Dahong slapped the table and shouted, "Very true, very true! Chen Zongduozhu's words really touch the bottom of my heart. *Laodi*, hearing you talked, my heart is unbearably itchy. What ingenious plan do you have, so that we can kill that traitor Wu and his entire family, and not leaving even his chicken and dogs?" He grabbed Chen Jinnan' arms and repeatedly shook him, saying, "Say it quickly, say it quickly!"

Chen Jinnan smiled and said, "This is everybody's wish, *Zaixia* does not have any ingenious plan to deal with Wu Sangui."

"Oh," Liu Dahong said, he released Chen Jinnan's arms, while disappointment appeared on his face.

Chen Jinnan stretched out his palm to Mu Jiansheng and said, "*Xiao Gongye*, we still have two palm strikes we haven't finished."

"Precisely," Mu Jiansheng said, he stretched out his hand and struck Chen Jinnan's palm twice.

Chen Jinnan turned toward Li Xihua and said, "Li *Xiong*, what about we also strike our palms three times?" While saying that, he held out his palm.

Li Xihua stood up and respectfully said, "If Chen *Zongduozhu* can kill that traitor Wu, the old Li will accept Tian Di Hui's orders, I will not dare to disobey. If by luck the old Li can put to death with my own hand this devilish wicked traitor, I only wish for Chen *Zongduozhu* to do me the honor to become the old Li's sworn brother, let *Zaixia* reveres you as the elder brother. Apart from this, I do not dare to request anything else."

Chen Jinnan laughed and said, "Li *Xiandi* [worthy younger brother], you esteem me too much. Very well, a real man gave his words, a team of four horses cannot chase it."

Watching from the side, Wei Xiaobao saw the heroes' fervent expression, he could not help but feeling very excited[39]; he really wished he could grow up right then and there, his martial art skill would reach high level immediately, just like this Li Xihua, who created quite a stir in front of all these heroes. Hearing Shifu said 'a real man gave his words, a team of four horses cannot chase it', he could not refrain from muttering to himself, "A team of four horses cannot chase it, a team of four horses cannot chase it." While thinking, "Damn it, what kind of horses are a team of four horses anyway? How can they run that fast?"

Chen Jinnan instructed his subordinates to prepare a banquet table to have a feast with these outstanding heroes. During the banquet, Li Xihua talked and laughed cheerfully, his knowledge was indeed extensive, but all along he never revealed his martial art school, family background, or his origin.

Li Lishi and Su Gang introduced the rest of their groups to Li Xihua. Seeing Wei Xiaobao was young, yet held the position of the Green Wood Hall's *Xiangzhu*, Li Xihua could not hide his astonishment; when he was told that Wei Xiaobao was Chen Jinnan's disciple, he thought, "So that's how it is." He drank several cups of wine, and then took his leave.

Chen Jinnan walked him to the door, and in a low voice said, "Li *Xiandi*, just now your humble brother did not know whether you were a friend or a foe, I have offended you. When I grabbed your ankle, I have surreptitiously used special power. It will flare-up after four hours. You must not use the slightest bit of internal energy to defuse it. You must dig a hole in a muddy ground, and bury your entire body in it, revealing only your mouth and nose to breathe. Every day you must be buried for eight hours, for seven days in a row, then there won't be any future trouble."

Li Xihua was shocked. "I was hit by your 'Blood Clotting Divine Claw'?" he said in loud voice.

"*Xiandi* must not be alarmed," Chen Jinnan said, "By treating it according to the prescribed method, there should not be any major problem. Your humble brother was reckless and has offended you, I am asking *Xiandi* not to blame me."

Immediately the panic-stricken expression on Li Xihua's face subsided. He laughed and said, "Indeed *Xiaodi* [little brother] suffers the consequence of my own action." He sighed, and then said, "Only today I know there is heaven outside the heaven, there is an expert above the expert." He bowed to salute, and then floated away.

"Chen *Zongduozhu*," Liu Dahong said, "Did you use the 'Blood Clotting Divine Claw' on him? I heard that people who got hit by this divine claw will have the blood in his entire body slowly clotting after three days, turning into paste just like starch paste; there is no medicine to cure it. Is that so?"

Chen Jinnan said, "This skill is extremely sinister and ruthless, usually *Xiaodi* does not dare to recklessly use it, but seeing his formidable martial art skill, plus he was eavesdropping on our secret, I was unclear whether he harbors any evil intention, so I took this drastic action. It's not a straightforward and upright thing to do, I am ashamed just to mention it."

Mu Jiansheng said, "If this man is Tatars' falcon or dog, or perhaps Wu Sangui's troop, and Chen *Zongduozhu* did not control him, our secret may be leaked out, then the disaster won't be small. Chen *Zongduozhu* is able to control the enemy in one move, damaging the other side without him knowing it. This kind of divine skill deserves the admiration of other people."

Chen Jinnan reiterated his deep apology on the death of Bai Hansong to Bai Hanfeng. "Chen *Zongduozhu*," Bai Hanfeng

said, "Let this matter rests and do not raise it again. My late brother has died, he can't come back to life. Wei *Xiangzhu* has rescued Wu Shishu and the others, three people, *Zaixia* is very grateful."

Mu Jiansheng was concerned over his missing little sister's whereabouts, but since Tian Di Hui warriors did not say anything, he felt it was inappropriate for him to inquire, so as not to appear that he doubted the opposite party's intention. After drinking several more rounds of wine, Mu Jiansheng and the others stood up to take their leave.

"*Xiao Gongye*," Wei Xiaobao said, "It would be best if you move from your lodging, sooner or later the Tatars will dispatch troops to harass you. Although you are not afraid of them, the Tatars might send more and more troops. I am afraid you cannot kill them all."

Liu Dahong laughed aloud and said, "*Xiao Xiongdi* is right, thank you very much for your reminder, we will move immediately."

Mu Jiansheng said, "Chen *Zongduozhu*, Wei *Xiangzhu*, friends, the green hills will not change, the clear water will always flow, I'm sure we will meet again someday."

After the Mu Palace people left, Chen Jinnan said, "Xiaobao, come with me. I want to see the progress of your martial art training these past several months."

Wei Xiaobao's heart was thumping madly, his countenance changed immediately. "Yes, yes," he replied, and followed his Shifu into a room in the east wing. "Shifu," he said, "The Emperor sends me to investigate the assassins' whereabouts, disciple may have to hurry back and report."

"What assassins' whereabouts?" Chen Jinnan asked. He had just arrived the previous night, so he only heard bits and pieces about the assassins in the Palace. Thereupon Wei Xiaobao told

him how the Mu Palace warriors entered the Palace to assassinate the emperor, with the intention of shifting the blame onto Wu Sangui.

Chen Jinnan let out a breath, "Is there such thing?" he said. Although he had gone through many storms, he was rather shocked to learn about this matter, he said, "Those friends from Mu Family are courageous and forthright, unexpectedly they carried out a large-scale operation into the Palace. I only knew that three of their people went to assassinate the Emperor, and thus were captured; turns out it was to deal with that traitor Wu Sangui. You have rescued Wu Lishen, three people, and now you want to return to the Palace, aren't you afraid of the danger?"

Wei Xiaobao wanted to flaunt his heroism, naturally he did not say that he released the assassins under the Emperor's order, so there was absolutely no danger in him returning to the Palace. He bragged, "Disciple has dragged several scapegoats, I shifted the blame on them. Looks like for the time being the suspicion will not fall onto your disciple. Shifu told me to spy for news in the Palace, if for the sake of saving three of Mu Palace's people disciple henceforth cannot return to the Palace, wouldn't I have harmed Shifu's important mission?"

Chen Jinnan was very happy. "That's right," he said, "We have struck palms three time with Mu Jiansheng to seal our oath. It is reasonable to say that Mu Palace does not have too many people left, so they can’t possibly match Tian Di Hui. I made that agreement with them, first, to avoid the argument about the legitimacy of King Tang versus King Gui, and thus harming the friendship between two families. The Tatars have not been wiped out yet, if we, Han people, massacre each other first, how can we accomplish the great undertaking? Second, if we can get the Mu Palace under our Society, it will enormously increase our Tian Di Hui’s power. The fact that they dared to

enter the Palace and create havoc shows that in order to topple that traitor Wu, they would stop at nothing. We also must spare no effort to accomplish this goal, otherwise, if they gain the initiative, Tian Di Hui must accept Mu Palace’s orders, won’t everybody be ashamed then?”

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said, "Mu *Xiao Gongye* does not have any real skill, he only relies on his good Papa. If I re-enter the womb of his mother, I could be born as the *Xiao Gongye*. For such a great hero like Shifu to be forced to take orders from him, if it were me, I would be angry too."

In all his life Chen Jinnan had heard countless flattering words, but since this time it came from a teenage kid, it sounded so sincere and encouraging; he could not help but showing a faint smile. He did not know that Wei Xiaobao's natural disposition was quick-witted and clever, plus he had lived in both a brothel and the Palace, two most hypocritical and devious places in the world. By living in these places, Wei Xiaobao had early on acquired craftiness, which was far above ordinary grownups. Chen Jinnan was used to dealing daily with heroes and warriors of Tian Di Hui, who treated one another with absolute sincerity, how could he know that this little disciple say something without meaning it? That in ten sentences, perhaps there were five or six sentences that can't be trusted? He patted Wei Xiaobao's shoulder and said with a smile, "What does a child like you understand? How do you know Mu *Xiao Gongye* does not have real skill?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "By sending assassins to the Palace, he has delivered many of his subordinates' lives for nothing, without really doing any damage to Wu Sangui. Not only he does not have any real skill, I can say that he is a big idiot."

"How do you know he is not doing any damage to Wu Sangui?" Chen Jinnan asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "This Mu Family's *Xiao Gongye* used a very

stupid strategy. He had the assassins who entered the Palace to wear undergarments with 'Ping Xi Wang Mansion' written on it, and use weapons with 'Ping Xi Wang Mansion' or something like ‘Regional Commander Office of Shanhai Pass of The Great Ming’ carved on it. The Tatars are not stupid, naturally they can think, if they were really Wu Sangui's men, why would they want to use such weapons?"

Chen Jinnan nodded, "You are right," he said.

Wei Xiaobao continued, "Wu Sangui's son Wu Yingxiong is in Beijing right now, carrying a large quantity of jewels and precious objects as a tribute to the Emperor. If Wu Sangui really wanted to assassinate the Emperor, he would not pick this time. Besides, why would he want to assassinate the Emperor? Unless he wants to dispatch troops to revolt and set himself up as the Emperor. But as soon as he dispatch his troops, the Tatars will immediately kill his son; why would he send his son to Beijing to die?"

Chen Jinnan nodded again. "That's right," he said.

Actually, although Wei Xiaobao was very astute, his age was still too young, his knowledge of military and government affairs, as well as the ways of the world, was very limited, he could not possibly come out with even half of the logic he had just presented. Luckily Kangxi had told him everything, which, in front of his Shifu, he pretended to see those logic himself.

When listening to him, Chen Jinnan thought that this disciple could see things clearly. Tian Di Hui did not lack martial art masters, but people with such clear brain were not many. Initially he let this little child to be the Green Wood Hall's *Xiangzhu* just to avoid the friction between the two rivaling factions, he needed to comply with everybody's oath first, and then slowly seeking a talented person to replace him. Since Wei Xiaobao was his own disciple, he could always ask him to abdicate his position honorably. By now, as he listened to him,

he mused, "This child has both courage and insight, even now he is quite amazing, after several more years of discipline, he could be a real Green Wood Hall's *Xiangzhu*, which is not necessarily inferior to the other nine *Xiangzhu*." He asked, "Did the Tatars know it?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Presently they are not very clear yet, but the Emperor seems to have suspicion already. This morning he summoned several Imperial Bodyguards and ordered them to demonstrate the martial art the assassins had used. Some Imperial Bodyguards performed the moves, and then everybody discussed it. Disciple was watching on the side, I remembered two moves." And thus he immediately demonstrated the ‘sweeping away a thousand army’, and 'high mountain flowing water', two moves.

Chen Jinnan sighed and said, "Mu Palace really does not have talented people anymore. These moves are obviously Mu Family Fist technique; there are not a few martial art experts among the Imperial Bodyguards in the Palace, how could they not recognize the moves?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Disciple has seen Feng Jizhong, Feng *Dage* and Priest Xuanzhen demonstrated these moves, I expect the Tatar Imperial Bodyguards would also recognize them. I was afraid the Tatars would search and arrest people, therefore, just now I urged the Mu Family's *Xiao Gongye* to move out of town to avoid the trouble."

"Very true, very true!" Chen Jinnan said, "You'd better go back to the Palace to report, come again tomorrow, I will teach you martial art some more."

Hearing his Shifu was not going to check his martial art right away, Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; hastily he saluted and took his leave, thinking, "Tonight I need to clasp the Buddha's feet[40]; I will ask Xiao Junzhu to read Shifu's martial art

manual to me, good or bad I will remember some, and then when Shifu ask tomorrow, whatever little things I know I can recite. Shifu can only blame me of not training correctly, but he can't blame me for being lazy and not want to work hard. Who told him not to have time to teach me? If he wants to blame somebody, he can only blame himself."

Wei Xiaobao returned to the Palace and went straight to the Upper Study Room. Kangxi was reviewing some memorial to the throne; as soon as he saw him, he laid down his pen and asked, "Have you found any information?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Your Majesty predicts with supernatural accuracy, you were not wrong at all, the rebel mastermind is indeed the Mu Family of Yunnan."

"Is that so?" Kangxi happily asked, "That's wonderful. Looking at Dolong's expression, he still does not believe it. What did you find?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Those three captured assassins stuck to what they initially say, that they were Wu Sangui subordinates, Dolong Zongguan beat them until they were hovering between life and death, but no matter what, they were unwilling to change their statement."

"Dolong's martial art skill is not bad," Kangxi said, "But he is a boorish fellow."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Under Your Majesty's imperial edict, your servant has used knockout drug to drug the Imperial Bodyguards, just when the Empress Dowager was sending four eunuchs over, saying that the assassins must be executed immediately. Your servant gathered my courage and acted according to the strategy Your Majesty planned, I killed the four eunuchs in front of the assassins and led the assassins out of the Palace. Those three rebellious thieves did not suspect anything at all."

Kangxi smiled and said, "A moment ago Dolong came to report that an eunuch leader under the Empress Dowager has set the assassins free; I was feeling strange, turns out it was your trick."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Your Majesty must not tell the Empress Dowager, otherwise your servant's lowly life will be difficult to protect. The Empress Dowager has scolded me for showing utter loyalty to His Majesty, but not utterly loyal toward the Empress Dowager. Actually, what's the difference between Your Majesty and the Empress Dowager? Besides, the sky cannot have two suns, the people cannot have two rulers; in the end, only Your Majesty's imperial decree counts. Without asking Your Majesty, the Empress Dowager has ordered the assassins to be executed; what kind of logic was that?"

Kangxi did not bother that Wei Xiaobao was trying to drive a wedge between him and the Empress Dowager, "I won't say anything to the Empress Dowager," he said, "About those three assassins, what happened next?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "I took them out of the Palace, without my asking they told me their real name and surname. Turns out the old man is called the 'Shaking Head Lion' Wu Lishen, the two younger ones, one is Ao Biao, the other Liu Yizhou. They thanked me profusely, but in the end your servant managed to swindle them, they took me to their leader. Sure enough, it is as Your Majesty expected, the mastermind behind all these is a young man, whom the rebellious thieves call *Xiao Gongye*, his real name and surname is Mu Jiansheng, he is Mu Tianbo's son. Under his command there is an old man whose martial art skill was very high, he is called something like 'Iron Back Dragon' Liu Dahong. And then there are also 'Divine Physician Hermit' Su Gang, the second hero of the Bai Family Two Heroes, Bai Hanfeng, and so on. They are staying separately at Willow Tree Lane and South Bean Sprout Lane, two places."

"Did you see both places?" Kangxi asked.

"I did," Wei Xiaobao replied, "They said that common people all over the world all say that although the Emperor is young, he is a matchless enlightened sage, a good emperor that is hard to come by in several thousand years. They said that even if they had guts as big as the sky, they would not have dared to harm the Emperor. Therefore, the night before last

they entered the Palace to deliberately create trouble, it was completely to frame Wu Sangui, to avenge their big hatred because he killed Mu Tianbo."

Unavoidably some of these words of flattery hit its target. Kangxi had not personally taken over the government for too long, the common people of the world could not possibly sing praises over his meritorious deed or virtue, but as the saying goes, 'anything gets through me except flattery[41]'. Hearing the common people praise him as 'a good emperor that is hard to come by in several thousand years', he could not help but feeling very pleased. He smiled and said, "I haven't produced any benevolent policy to the benefit of the people yet, 'matchless enlightened sage' and so on is your own fabrication, isn't it?"

"No, no!" Wei Xiaobao said, "It came straight from their own mouths. Everybody says that that big treacherous official Oboi cruelly harmed common people, they all hated him to the bones. When Your Majesty decided to put him to his death, it was a very, very good decision. They speak highly of you as some raw bird [niao sheng] or some fish soup [yu tang]. Your servant did not understand, I assumed it was words of praise, so I was very happy to hear it."

Kangxi was taken aback, but then he understood immediately and broke into loud laughter. "It's 'Yao Shun Yu Tang'," he said, "Damn it, what do you mean 'niao sheng yu tang'?" He thought

that Wei Xiaobao could not possibly come up with 'Yao Shun Yu Tang', therefore, the compliment must be real. He did not know that when telling the story of 'Heroic Deed Commentaries', the storyteller mentioned that the crowd continuously praised Zhu Yuanzhang[42] as 'Yao Shun Yu Tang'. Wei Xiaobao heard the story often. Although he did not understand the meaning of it, he knew that 'Yao Shun Yu Tang' was words of praise to flatter the emperor; it was said that each time Zhu Yuanzhang heard it, his 'dragon countenance looked very pleased'.

This time Wei Xiaobao used the same flattery toward the young Emperor, and sure enough, Kangxi's his 'dragon countenance looked very pleased', his laughter was very joyous and free, so he knew the bootlicking was right on target. "Your Majesty." he asked, "What exactly is 'niao sheng yu tang'?"

Kangxi laughed and said, "You still say raw bird and fish soup? This kid really does not have the least bit of literary knowledge. Yao Shun Yu Tang[43] were four learned and virtuous wise monarch of the ancient times, great sages with great knowledge, due to their benevolent integrity, they are recognized as good Emperors of the land under the heavens."

"No wonder, no wonder!" Wei Xiaobao said, "Those rebellious thieves are not completely ignorant of reasons."

"Even so," Kangxi said, "We must not let them escape. Quickly summon Dolong over."

Wei Xiaobao complied; he went out to summon the Imperial Bodyguard Chief Dolong into the Upper Study Room. Kangxi instructed Dolong, "The rebellious thieves are really Mu Family's people from Yunnan. Take the Imperial Bodyguards and arrest them immediately. Xiao Guizi, why don't you tell Dolong the background of those rebellious thieves' group?"

Wei Xiaobao immediately told Dolong the names of Mu

Jiansheng, Liu Dahong, and the others. Dolong was startled; he said, “Turns out it is the ‘Iron Back Blue Dragon’ who manage this operation in secret, these bunch of thieves’ background is indeed not small. That ‘Shaking-Head Lion’ Wu Lishen, your servant has also heard his name; I did not expect him to be locked up in the Palace for a day and a night, yet I could not obtain any real information from him. If your servant is a little bit smarter, seeing him always shaking his head, I should have guessed it early on. If not for the Sage’s wise judgment, we in the Imperial Bodyguard building would still think that those people were sent by Wu Sangui.”

Showing a faint smile, Kangxi said, “I am afraid they have already gone by now, this time you may not necessarily able to arrest them.” After a short pause, he continued, “Since we already know the mastermind, it’s not a big deal even if this time we can’t arrest them. I am just afraid that we will be kept in the dark[44]; we still don’t know that we have fallen into other people’s trick.”

“Yes, yes,” Dolong said, “Your servants are muddle-headed, fortunately our Master is wise, otherwise it would be disastrous.” He kowtowed and took his leave, immediately selected some of his men to arrest the rebels.

“Xiao Guizi,” Kangxi said, “I am going to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful to pay my respect, come with me.”

“Yes!” Wei Xiaobao complied; but thinking that he was going to see the Empress Dowager, he could help but trembling with fear and appeared apprehensive.

Kangxi said, “Why are you frowning and look distressed? I am taking you to see Empress Dowager is exactly to preserve your head.”

“Yes, yes!” Wei Xiaobao replied.

Arrived at the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, Kangxi paid his respect to the Empress Dowager, reporting clearly the assassins' background, telling her that it was he, personally, who ordered Xiao Guizi to release the assassins and finally ascertained the actual facts.

The Empress Dowager smiled and said, "Xiao Guizi, you can work very well!"

Wei Xiaobao kneeled down and kowtowed, "It was due to His Majesty's ability to prophecy with supernatural accuracy, everything has been calculated beforehand," he said, "Your servant was only bidding His Majesty's order, nothing more than that. Although it was your servant who did the legwork, from head to tail I was just following His Majesty's order, your servant did not have the least bit of idea of his own."

The Empress Dowager cast a glance at him, snorted, and then said, "You are naughty, and it was not His Majesty who orders you to fool around! A little kid who left home to enter the Palace must want to play everywhere. Have you been to the Heavenly Bridge to see some acrobats? Have you bought some candied fruits?"

Wei Xiaobao recalled seeing government officials arresting candied fruits peddlers, he guessed they must be sent by the Empress Dowager; she was afraid the man would transmit the information to Rui Dong on Wutai Mountain, therefore, without distinguishing red-blue or black-white, she had all candied fruits peddlers around the Heavenly Bridge arrested. Wei Xiaobao was sure that without distinguishing red-blue or black-white, they would all be beheaded. Thinking about her ruthlessness, he could not help but shiver. "Yes, yes!" he said.

The Empress Dowager smiled and said, "I am asking you, have you bought some candied fruits lately?"

"Reporting to the Empress Dowager," Wei Xiaobao replied,

“Your servant heard people on the street say that the Heavenly Bridge is not really safe these days, the Nine-Gate provincial governor office has arrested the candied fruits peddlers, saying that there are many bad men among them. Therefore, those who originally sell candied fruits now change their professions; some sell cool cakes, some sell peanuts, some change their professions to sell sour dates, sell sweet cookies. Your servant has often seen many of these people, I am somewhat familiar with their faces, they say they are not going to sell candied fruits anymore. One of them was really funny, he said he was going to go to some Wutai or Liutai[45] Mountain to sell some plain steamed buns to the monks.”

The Empress Dowager raised her eyebrows in anger; naturally she understood that by saying that, Wei Xiaobao was telling her that the man who was supposed to transmit information had not been arrested, and that she could forget about arresting him later. With a cold smile she said, “Very good, you are very good, you are really competent. Emperor, I want to have him by my side, doing things for me. What do you think?”

These days Kangxi always sent Wei Xiaobao to do errands for him, and Wei Xiaobao was very efficient, so Kangxi started to rely on him like his own left and right hands. The purpose of his visit to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful this time was exactly to explain to the Empress Dowager that Wei Xiaobao killed the four eunuchs she sent under his order, so he would ask that the Empress Dowager did not blame him. Suddenly hearing that the Empress Dowager wanted Wei Xiaobao, he could not help but was startled. He was very filial to her. Although the Empress Dowager was not his own mother, but she raised him up from childhood until he grew up, so she was no different than his own mother. Not daring to disobey, he smiled and said, “Xiao Guizi, the Empress Dowager is promoting you, why haven’t you thanked her for her favor?”

Hearing the Empress Dowager wanted to take him from the Emperor, Wei Xiaobao was already scared out of his wits, in that instant his mind went blank, he only wanted to flee; this time he wanted to run away from the Palace and never come back. Hearing Kangxi, he busily replied, “Yes, yes!” And then he kowtowed and said, “Thank you Empress Dowager for your grace, thank you Your Majesty for your grace.”

“What is it?” the Empress Dowager said with a cold laugh, “You only want to serve His Majesty and do not want to serve me, is that it?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Serving the Empress Dowager and serving His Majesty are the same, your servant will do it with the same loyalty and devotion, I will strive hard to do your bidding.”

“That’s good,” the Empress Dowager said, “You don’t need to take care of the Catering Department’s business anymore, you will concentrate on doing the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful’s business.”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Thank you Empress Dowager for your grace.”

Seeing the Empress Dowager wanted to take over Wei Xiaobao, Kangxi was unhappy; he made some small talk, and then quickly took his leave. Wei Xiaobao followed him out.

The Empress Dowager said, “Xiao Guizi, stay here. Let other people escort His Majesty back. I have something I want you to do.”

“Yes!” Wei Xiaobao replied. In a daze he watched Kangxi’s back as he left the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, thinking, “This time you leave, I will be in big trouble. I don’t know if I can see you again in the future.” He almost could not hold his desire to cry aloud.

The Empress Dowager drank her tea slowly, while her gaze had never left Wei Xiaobao, sizing him up. She noticed that he

was very scared. After a long time she asked, “The man who is going to Wutai Mountain to sell plain steamed buns, when is he going to return?”

“Your servant does not know,” Wei Xiaobao replied.

“When are you going to see him again?” the Empress Dowager asked.

Wei Xiaobao said whatever came into his head, “Your servant has agreed to meet him in a month, but it won’t be at the Heavenly Bridge anymore.”

“Where is it?” the Empress Dowager asked.

Wei Xiaobao replied, “He said that when the time comes, he will find a way to notify your servant.”

The Empress Dowager nodded, she said, “In that case you may stay in the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, waiting for his news.” She gently clapped her hands, and from the inner chamber a palace maid appeared.

The palace maid looked like she was thirty five or thirty six years old, very fat, yet her footsteps were very lithe. Her face looked like a full moon, with small eyes and big mouth; she giggled while bowing to pay her respect to the Empress Dowager.

The Empress Dowager said, “This little eunuch is called Xiao Guizi, he is audacious and is a trouble maker, but I like him very much."

The palace maid smiled and said, “Yes, this *Xiao Xiongdi* looks very clever. *Xiao Xiongdi*, my name is Liu Yan, but you can just call me *Jiejie*.”

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, “Damn it, you are a fat pig!” But he laughed and said, “Yes, Liu Yan *Jiejie*, your name is very appropriate, your figure looks like a willow tree, your steps are light and quick, just like a little swallow [Liu – willow, Yan –

swallow].” In front of the Empress Dowager, no other eunuch or palace maid had ever dared to say even half a frivolous word like that, but Wei Xiaobao knew he was doomed anyway; there was no difference whether he said it or not, but even if he did not say it, he would not be spared anyway.

Liu Yan giggled and said, “*Xiao Xiongdi*, your mouth is sweet indeed.”

The Empress Dowager said, “His mouth is sweet, his feet are quick. Liu Yan, think of a way to keep him from running this way and that, wandering and rushing aimlessly around the Palace.”

Liu Yan said, “Empress Dowager may hand him over to your servant, let me look after him well.”

The Empress Dowager shook her head and said, “This little monkey is very slippery, you can’t continuously keep your eyes on him. I sent Rui Dong to summon him, he smooth-talked him so that that coward ran away. I sent four eunuchs to summon him, he colluded with the Imperial Bodyguards and killed those four eunuchs. I sent four more eunuchs; I don’t know what kind of trick he had, unexpectedly Dong Jinkui and the others, four people, were also killed.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk,” Liu Yan clucked her tongue repeatedly; she laughed and said, “Aiyo, *Xiao Xiongdi*, you are too naughty, aren’t you too difficult to be dealt with? Empress Dowager, if we chopped both of his legs and just let him lie down nicely, won’t we enjoy a lot more of peace and quiet?”

The Empress Dowager sighed and said, “I’ll say it might be the only way.”

Wei Xiaobao sprang up and bolted toward the door. His left leg had just stepped over the threshold, suddenly he felt his scalp tightened, someone pulled his pigtail. His head was jerked backward, his body refused to obey him and he fell flat on his

back, there was a severe of pain on the pit of his stomach as a foot stepped on his chest. It was a big and fat foot, wearing red satin shoe embroidered with golden flower; Liu Yan's foot had landed on him. In desperation Wei Xiaobao's mouth rained curses, "Stinky mother, take your stinky foot off!"

Liu Yan added more force into her foot, a dozen or so ribs in Wei Xiaobao's chest were making random cracking noise, he could not even breathe. He heard Liu Yan said with a laugh, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, your pair of feet is very fragrant, I really want to chop them down and have a smell."

Wei Xiaobao thought that the Empress Dowager hated him to the bones; she would not hesitate to chop both of his feet, and then have him carried up to see the man who was supposed to transmit the news to Rui Dong. She might also dispatch a martial art master to follow the man going up Wutai Mountain in secret, and had Rui Dong killed. But Rui Dong was no longer on the world of the living, so his trick would eventually be exposed. The most important matter right now was to save his legs; since a threat would be useless right now, he could only try to entice her with something she wanted. Thereupon he coldly said, "Empress Dowager, it's not a big deal for you to chop my legs; even if you chop my head, Xiao Guizi will only getting a bit shorter; there is nothing special about it. Too bad about the Forty-two-chapter Sutra. Hey, hey, hey, hey …"

As soon as the Empress Dowager heard the words 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra', she stood up immediately and asked, "What did you say?"

"I said, unavoidably it will be too bad about that book 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'," Wei Xiaobao replied.

The Empress Dowager said to Liu Yan, "Let him get up." Liu Yan lifted her left foot from Wei Xiaobao's chest; inserting her foot underneath Wei Xiaobao's body, she kicked Wei Xiaobao's back that his body shot up. Stretching out her left hand, she

grabbed Wei Xiaobao by the back of his collar, lifted him up high in the air, and then put him down heavily on the floor. All along Wei Xiaobao was unable to neither resist nor struggle free, as if he was merely an infant. The curse 'stinky mother' was already on the tip of his tongue, but he was so scared that he swallowed it back into his belly.

The Empress Dowager asked, "About the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra', where did you hear it from?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "You are going to chop my two legs anyway, I won't say anything, we are all going to go our own way[46], I won't have any legs any head, you won't have the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'."

Liu Yan said, "I advise you to answer the Empress Dowager's question nicely."

Wei Xiaobao said, "If I answer, I will die, if I don't answer, I will also die; why would I want to answer? At most you will punish me heavier, I am not afraid."

Liu Yan picked up his left hand; she said with a laugh, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, your fingers are slim and long, they look exceptionally good."

"At most you can cut off my fingers," Wei Xiaobao said, "Nothing special about it …" before he finished speaking, he felt severe pain on his finger. "Ah!" he screamed, as Liu Yan's two fingers held his left-hand forefinger and pinched it hard, that his bone was nearly broken. The fat woman had a smiling, affable face, but they way she made her move was very ruthless, the power of her fingers was even more astonishing, her pinch felt like a pair of iron pliers.

This time Wei Xiaobao suffered a major pain, tears flowing continuously from his eyes. "Empress Dowager," he called out, "Kill me quickly, that book 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra', the one

called ‘the old cat smelling salted fish’, just smell the wine-preserved pomfret, just smell the fish!” [Book note: the word ‘smell the wine-preserved pomfret’ (xiu xiang - 嗅鲞), sounds alike ‘don’t even think about it’ (xiu xiang - 休想)]

“Just tell me the truth about the ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’, I’ll spare your life,” the Empress Dowager said.

“I don’t need you to spare my life,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “I am determined not to say anything about the book.”

The Empress Dowager frowned slightly, she was actually at a loss of how to deal with this stubborn child. After half a day, she slowly said, “Liu Yan, if he does not want to talk, you may dig out his two eyeballs.”

Liu Yan laughed and said, “Very good, I will dig out one eyeball first. *Xiao Xiongdi*, your eyeballs grew to be very pretty, they are black and round, and can spin and roll around. But after I dig them out, they won’t look too pretty anymore.” While saying that, she placed the thumb of her right hand on his right eyelid and pushed it slightly.

Wei Xiaobao felt a stabbing pain on his eyeball, he had no choice but to surrender. “I surrender, I surrender!” he cried out, “Don’t dig my eyeballs out, I’ll talk.”

Liu Yan let off her hand; she said with a smile, “Now that’s a good child. Just talk nicely, the Empress Dowager will love you very much.”

Wei Xiaobao reached up to rub his eye, blinking the hurting eye several times. He closed the other eye, cocked his head and looked at Liu Yan for a moment, and then he shook his head and said, “It’s not right, it’s not right!”

“What’s not right?” Liu Yan asked, “Don’t put on an act, the Empress Dowager is asking you a question, quickly give her an honest answer.”

“You have damaged my eyeball,” Wei Xiaobao said, “The things I look at change shapes. I see you as having a human body, but on your neck grew a big fat pig head.”

Liu Yan was not angry; she giggled and said, “That sounds fun. I must damage your left eyeball too.”

Wei Xiaobao took a step back and said, “Please excuse me this time, thank you very much.” He shut his left eye and looked at the Empress Dowager, and then he shook his head.

The Empress Dowager thought, “This little demon looked at Liu Yan with one eye and said a pig’s head rested on her neck. Now he looked at me the same way; although his mouth did not say anything, I don’t know how he is cursing me in his heart, he must be saying that he saw some animal’s head resting on my neck.” She said coldly, “Liu Yan, you’d better dig his eyeball now, so that he won’t look to the east and to the west.”

Wei Xiaobao hastily said, “If I don’t have any eyeball, how am I going to get the ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’ for you?”

“You have a ‘Forty-two-chapter Sutra’?” the Empress Dowager asked, “Where did you get it from?”

“Rui Dong gave it to me,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “He asked me to take a good care of it, to keep it in a very secret place. He said, ‘Xiao Guizi *Xiongdi*, there are a lot of people in the Palace who want to harm you. If in the future you have some unfortunate things happen to you, like taking your eyeballs out or chopping your legs, this book henceforth will not see the light of the day. The person who harms you, although his eyeballs are not blind, he won’t see this treasured scripture, so he won’t differ from someone whose eyeballs are blind. This is called ‘acting for oneself and suffer the consequences’. Empress Dowager, the scripture has a red silk envelope with white border around it. I don’t know if it is the one you want.”

The Empress Dowager did not believe Rui Dong said those

words, but it was a fact that she sent Rui Dong on a mission to put to death the leader of the Bordered Red Banner Hochabo and took the copy of Forty-two-chapter Sutra hidden in his mansion. When Rui Dong came back to report that day, she was anxious to have Wei Xiaobao killed to close his mouth, hence she did not have time to inquire about the sutra. This time she heard Wei Xiaobao said so, she was angry and happy at the same time; angry because unexpectedly Rui Dong handed over the sutra to this little demon, happy because finally she found the sutra's whereabouts. "Since that's the case," she said, "Liu Yan, go with this little demon to fetch the sutra and give it to me. If the sutra is not fake, we will spare his life, and return him to the Emperor. Afterwards we won't allow him to enter the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful forever, to avoid I seeing this little demon and get angry."

Liu Yan pulled Wei Xiaobao's right hand and said with a laugh, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, let's go!"

Wei Xiaobao shook her hand away, he said, "I am a man, you are a woman, what do you want holding and pulling my hand like that?" Liu Yan seemed to hold his palm only gently, who would have thought that it was as if there a very strong suction force from her fingers? Wei Xiaobao's palm was firmly stuck onto her hand, he was unable to shake her hand away.

Liu Yan said with a laugh, "You are an eunuch, how can you be regarded as a man? Even if you are a real man, you, this little demon, is still too young to be my son."

"Is that right?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "You want to be my mother? I think you look exactly like my mother."

How would Liu Yan know that in a roundabout way, Wei Xiaobao was cursing her as a wh0re? "Pei!" she spat, and then she laughed and said, "Your Miss is a virgin, don't talk nonsense!" Pulling his hand, she took him out.

As they reached the long corridor, Wei Xiaobao was frantically trying to find an ingenious way to escape from her clutch. The extremely sharp dagger was inside his right boot, if he could stretch out his right hand, he could pull it out, but as soon as he made a move, she would detect it immediately. This woman's martial art skill was very profound, even if he had a very sharp weapon in his hand, he might not necessarily able to exchange three moves or two styles with her. He muttered under his breath, "Damn it, where did this fat pig come from? Why didn't Boss Qian deliver a good pig? When he sent that fat pig, I already felt something inauspicious. When the old wh0re fought the old turtle, I am sure this fat sow was not in the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful yet; otherwise, as soon as she came out to help, the old turtle would die immediately. This sow must have arrived in the Palace within the last couple of days, otherwise, a few days ago the old wh0re would have sent her to kill me, she did not have to personally do the job." Thinking to this point, he had a sudden idea, he led her eastwards, toward the Upper Study Room next to the Palace of Heavenly Purity. He figured out that all he need to do was to ask Kangxi to save his life. This fat pig had not been in the Palace for too long, she might not necessarily know the pathways around the Palace.

He only took one step to the east, the second step had not been taken, the back of his collar tightened, Liu Yan had seized him. With a giggle she said, "Good *Xiongdi*, where are you going?"

"To my room to fetch the scripture of course," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"Why are you heading toward the Upper Study Room, then?" Liu Yan asked, "You are thinking of asking His Majesty to save you?"

Wei Xiaobao could not bear not to curse, "Stinky pig, you

know the way around the palace."

Liu Yan said, "Other places I might not know, but around the Palace of Heavenly Purity, the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, and your, *Xiao Xiongdi*'s dwelling, I can't be wrong." She exerted her strength to the right, Wei Xiaobao's body was twisted westwards. She said with a laugh, "Just walk obediently, don't waste other people's time." Her voice was gentle, but the power with which she twist Wei Xiaobao was really heavy. Wei Xiaobao's neck bones made some cracking noise, he yelled in pain, he thought that his neck bone had been wrenched apart by her.

There were two eunuchs ahead, when they heard his scream, they turned their heads around. Liu Yan said in a low voice, "The Empress Dowager ordered me to kill you immediately whenever you want to run away or make noise to call people."

Wei Xiaobao thought that even though he cried for help and alarmed the Emperor, Kangxi would not possibly defy the Empress Dowager's order. Although the Emperor was good to him, in no way would he anger his mother for the sake of a little eunuch. It would be best if they could come across several Imperial Bodyguards, so that he could instigate them to kill Liu Yan. Suddenly he felt a sharp pain on his waist as with her elbow she struck him hard; he heard her saying, "Thinking of using some trick?"

Wei Xiaobao had no choice but to walk toward his own room. He mused, "When we get to my room, although I will have two helpers, both Fang Yi and Xiao Junzhu are injured; even if we fight three to one, we still cannot overcome this big fat pig. If she saw any sign of those two girls, I would only deliver those two people's lives in vain."

When they reached the front door, Wei Xiaobao took out the key to unlock the door. He deliberately bumped the key to the lock, making a loud clinking noise. "Stinky mother," he said

loudly, "Big fat pig, you torment me like this, I'll say that there will come a day that you will not die a good death."

Liu Yan laughed and said, "You can't even tell if you will die a good death or not, yet you meddle into other people's business."

'Bang!' Wei Xiaobao shoved open the door, he said, "Whether I give the scripture to the Empress Dowager or not, you will kill me anyway. Do you think I am a fool, thinking that I will be lucky enough to escape with my life?"

"The Empress Dowager already said she will spare you," Liu Yan said, "Most likely she will spare your life, at most she will dig your eyeballs and chop off your legs."

Wei Xiaobao cursed, "You think the Empress Dowager is treating you very well? After you kill me, the Empress Dowager will definitely kill you to shut your mouth." These words seemed to echo the load in Liu Yan's mind. She stared with blank expression for a moment, but then she exerted her strength to give Wei Xiaobao's back a push. Wei Xiaobao could not stand his ground, he crashed into the room. He talked a lot outside the room with the hope that Fang Yi and Xiao Junzhu would hear and know that an extremely ferocious enemy was coming, so that they could withdraw inside the quilt and not dare to breathe too loud.

Liu Yan laughed and said, "I don't have time to wait for you, get it a little quicker please." And she pushed heavily on his back again. Wei Xiaobao stumbled several steps into the inner room. Liu Yan followed him in.

Wei Xiaobao took a glance and saw two pairs of women's shoes arranged neatly in front of the bed. It was already dark outside, there was neither lantern nor candle lighted in the room. Having entered the room later, Liu Yan did not immediately see the shoes. "Not good!" Wei Xiaobao cried out

inwardly. Seizing the opportunity he threw himself forward and pushed the two pairs of shoes underneath the bed, while he himself also crawled inside, thinking that perhaps this time he would be able to kill the fat pig the same way he killed Rui Dong. As soon as he was in, he pulled his right leg in so that his right hand could reach and pull the dagger inside his boot. Unexpectedly, his right ankle tightened, it was grabbed by Liu Yan.

"What are you doing?" he heard Liu Yan asked.

"I am getting the book," Wei Xiaobao replied, "I keep it under the bed."

"Alright!" Liu Yan said; thinking that he would not be able to run anywhere from under the bed, she released her grip. Wei Xiaobao shrank his body as small as possible, while pulling the dagger and held it in his hand. "Take it out!" Liu Yan shouted.

"Uh, there must be some rats in here," Wei Xiaobao said, "Aiyo, aiyo, it's really bad, why did they chew the book into pieces?"

"It's useless for you to play any trick in front of me!" Liu Yan said, "Give me the book!" She stretched out her hand to grab, but she grabbed an empty air, because Wei Xiaobao had withdrawn and leaned against the wall. Liu Yan crawled two *chi* forward, the upper part of her body was already under the bed, again she stretched out her fingers to grab.

Wei Xiaobao turned around slightly, without making any noise he stabbed the dagger forward. The tip of the dagger had just touched the back of her hand, Liu Yan had already detected it; her reaction was extremely fast and nimble, flipping her right hand over, she grabbed Wei Xiaobao's wrist and squeezed it hard. Wei Xiaobao entirely lost the strength in his hand, and had no choice but to let the dagger dropped.

Liu Yan laughed and said, "You want to kill me? I'll dig out

your eyeballs first." With her right hand she grabbed his throat, with her left fingers she was about to dig his eyes.

"A snake!" Wei Xiaobao cried out.

Liu Yan was startled. "What?" she said. Suddenly, "Ah!" she screamed, the hand grabbing Wei Xiaobao's throat slowly loosened, her body twisted several times, and then she dropped down to the floor.

Wei Xiaobao was startled but happy; quickly he crawled out from under the bed, only to head Mu Jianping said, "Are ... are you injured?"

Wei Xiaobao lifted the mosquito net open and saw Fang Yi sitting on the bed, holding the sword's hilt with both hands, continuously gasping for breath. The sword blade penetrated the mattress to the bottom of the bed, right up to the hilt. Turned out she heard Wei Xiaobao's desperate situation and thrust the sword down from above the bed, passing through the cotton-padded mattress and the bed frame strung with palm fiber, straight into Liu Yan's back.

Wei Xiaobao kicked Liu Yan's buttocks. Seeing she did not move at all, he was very happy. "Good ... Good *Jiejie*," he said, "You saved my life."

Based on Liu Yan's martial art skill, Fang Yi's sneak attack would not easily succeed; but since seeing Wei Xiaobao unlocking the door, Liu Yan had never thought that there was someone else in the room. Moreover, the sword had come from above the mattress, stabbing down, so that she did not have the slightest indication of the incoming attack. By the time she realized it, the sword had already pierced her heart. Even if her martial art skill was ten times stronger, she would still be incapable to evade. But then a real martial art master of her rank would not crawl underneath the bed to grab others. Wei Xiaobao was afraid she had not died completely, he pulled the

sword and thrust it through the mattress two more times.

"Who is this wicked woman?" Mu Jianping asked, "She was quite vicious, she wanted to dig out your eyeballs."

"She is the old wh0re Empress Dowager's subordinate," Wei Xiaobao replied. Turning to Fang Yi he asked, "Is your wound painful?"

With a crease of her eyebrows Fang Yi replied, "Tolerable!" Actually, she had exerted an enormous effort in thrusting the sword a moment ago that her wound was affected; the pain was so severe that she nearly fainted, beads of perspiration were dripping from her forehead.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Very soon the old wh0re will send someone else here, we have to think of a way to escape immediately. Um, you two girls change into men's clothing, disguise yourselves as eunuchs, we'll sneak out of the Palace. Good *Jiejie*, can you walk?"

"I can force myself to," Fang Yi replied.

Wei Xiaobao took out two sets of his own clothing. "Put these on," he said.

Dragging Liu Yan's body from under the bed, he stabbed it several times with his dagger, and then sprinkled some 'Corpse Transforming Powder' on the wounds. Hastily he packed his banknotes, gold, silver and jewels, two copies of the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra', as well as the martial art manual from his Shifu into a bundle. Naturally he also brought along the large bundle of knockout drug and the 'Corpse Transforming Powder'.

Mu Jianping finished changing her clothes and she got out of the bed first. "What a smart-looking little eunuch," Wei Xiaobao praised, "Let me help you with the braid."

A moment later, Fang Yi also got out of the bed. Her stature was slightly taller than Wei Xiaobao, the clothes she wore was

stretched tight, it was not a good-fitting at all. When she looked at the mirror, she could not help laughing.

Mu Jianping said with a laugh, "I let him helped me with my braid, let me help *Shijie* with your braid."

Wei Xiaobao took Mu Jianping's long hair and carelessly braided big pigtail. Mu Jianping looked herself in the mirror and said, "Aiyo, it's so ugly, I have to redo the braid."

"We don't have time to redo it right now," Wei Xiaobao said, "It's already dark, we can't go out the Palace. When the old wh0re realizes the fat pig is not coming back, she will send someone else to get me. We must find another place to hide, early in the morning tomorrow we will sneak out of the Palace."

Fang Yi asked, "Won't the old ... the Empress Dowager send people to investigate all gates of the Palace thoroughly?"

"We have no choice but to take it one step at a time," Wei Xiaobao replied. He remembered the room where he used to have martial art and wrestling contest with Kangxi was very quiet, he had never seen a third person come over there, thereupon he helped the two girls walking out of his residence.

Mu Jianping's leg was broken, she took the door bolt[47] and used it as a crutch. Fang Yi took a step, but her chest was hurting. Wei Xiaobao wrapped his right arm around her waist, half lifting and half pulling, he helped her walk. Luckily it was already dark outside, plus he picked the most secluded pathway. They came across several eunuchs, but nobody paid them any attention. When they reached the room, all three of them breathed a sigh of relief. Wei Xiaobao turned around and bolted the door, and then helped Fang Yi sitting on a chair. He said in a low voice, "We must not talk in here, there is a corridor outside, it's not as secluded as my room."

The night grew darker, at first they could still see each other's

facial features, afterwards all they could see was dim silhouette of each other. Mu Jianping did not like the pigtail braided by Wei Xiaobao, she untied it and redid it herself. Fang Yi pulled her own pigtail and rubbed it in her hands and played with it. "Ah!" suddenly she exclaimed softly.

"What is it?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Nothing," Fang Yi replied, "I dropped a silver hairpin."

"Ah," Mu Jianping said, "It was me. When I untied your hair, I put that silver hairpin on the table, after I finished braiding your pigtail, I forgot to give that silver hairpin back to you. Oh no, it was a gift from Liu *Shige*, wasn't it?"

"Only a hairpin, it doesn't really matter," Fang Yi said.

Although she said it did not matter, Wei Xiaobao could hear the extreme disappointment in her voice; he thought, "I must be a good person to the end, I'll go quietly and get the hairpin back for her." But he did not say anything for the time being. After a while, he said, "I am very hungry, if I have to wait until tomorrow, I am afraid I won't have the strength to walk. I'll go out to find something to eat."

"Come back quickly," Mu Jianping said.

"I will," Wei Xiaobao replied. He went to the door and listened, after making sure there was nobody outside, he opened the door and walked out.

He quickly returned to his room. Afraid that the Empress Dowager might send someone to wait for him, he circled to the back of the room and listened for quite a long time. When he was sure there was nobody inside and outside, he pushed the window open and climbed in. Sure enough, under the moonlight he could see the silver hairpin lying on the table. The workmanship of this silver hairpin was very crude, at most it only worth one or two *qian*. He thought, "Liu Yizhou is very poor, he presented Miss Fang with such an ugly gift." He spat on

the hairpin before putting it inside his pocket. From tin cans, wicker baskets, drawers, shelves above the bed, and so on he carelessly took some cakes, pastries and other snacks and stuffed everything into a cardboard box and put it inside his pocket.

He was about to climb out the window when suddenly he saw a pair of red shoes embroidered with golden thread in front of the bed, unexpectedly, there was a foot in each shoe.

Wei Xiaobao jumped up in fright. It was indeed terrifying to see under the dim moonlight a pair of cut off feet wearing a pair of bright-colored red shoes. But he understood immediately: when Liu Yan's body was dissolved by the 'Corpse Transforming Powder', the ground in front of the bed was uneven, the corpse turned into yellow liquid and flowed toward the bottom of the bed, leaving behind a pair of feet that did not melt. He turned around, wanted to kick the pair of feet into the yellow liquid, but the yellow liquid had dried out. His 'Corpse Transforming Powder' was in the bundle by Fang Yi and Mu Jianping's side. Racking his brain, suddenly his childish mind was aroused, "Damn it, this time *laozi* leave the Palace and won't see the old wh0re anymore. *Laozi* will throw these two feet into her room to scare her half dead." Fetching a long gown, he took the pair of feet complete with the shoes and wrapped everything firmly before he finally climbed out the window and quietly walked toward the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful.

As he approached the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, he did not dare to walk straight into it but circled around the flowering bushes instead. For each step he took, he stopped and listened for a while; thinking, "If I am not careful, the old wh0re might get me; won't that mean I am walking into a trap?" He was excited, but scared at the same time. Step by step he crept toward the Empress Dowager's personal chamber. His palms were sweating more and more, he mused, "I'll put

these pig hooves on the step stone in front of the door, she will definitely find it tomorrow, it's too dangerous to sneak into the courtyard."

He quietly took two more steps forward, suddenly he heard a man's voice saying, "What's wrong with Ah Yan? Why she has not come back by now?"

Wei Xiaobao was greatly surprised, "How can there be a man in the room?" he thought, "The voice does not belong to an eunuch. Is it possible that the old wh0re has a lover? Ha ha, *laozi* must catch these adulterous lovers." Although in his heart he wanted to 'catch these adulterous lovers', he would not dare to do it, even if he had ten times more courage. But his curiosity was greatly piqued, he was unwilling to simply put down the cutoff feet and leave.

He tiptoed toward the voice for several steps, with each step he carefully lifted up his foot and even more carefully put it down, to guard against stepping on a deadwood and thus make a noise. He heard the man snorted and said, "Perhaps something has changed. Since you already knew this little demon is very crafty, why did you let Ah Yan went with him alone?"

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "Turns out you are talking about *laozi*." He heard the Empress Dowager said, "Ah Yan's martial art skill is ten times higher than his, she is also very astute, very vigilant in each step she takes, how can she meet with any mishap? Most likely the sutra is kept far away from here, so Ah Yan has to go with that little demon."

The man said, "Naturally it is very good if we can get the sutra; otherwise, humph, humph!"

The tone of his voice was very stern, speaking like that to the Empress Dowager was indeed extremely rude. Wei Xiaobao was getting more and more puzzled, "Who in the world can talk to

her like that? Could it be that the Old Emperor is back from Mount Wutai?" Thinking that Emperor Shunzhi was back at the Palace, he was very excited; he thought he was going to see some good action very soon. What he found very strange was that there was not a single palace maid or eunuch around; presumably the Empress Dowager had sent them all away.

He heard the Empress Dowager said, "You know I have done everything possible. With my capacity right now, I can't personally go back and forth around the Palace with a little eunuch. As soon as I took a step out of the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, a large entourage of palace maids and eunuchs will follow me around, how can I manage to get anything done?"

The man said, "Can't you wait until it was dark to send him out? Or just notify me, let me go with him to fetch the sutra."

"I do not dare to toil your honorable self," the Empress Dowager replied, "We must not reveal any trail of your presence here."

With a cold laugh the man said, "Coming across an important matter like this, why do we care? I know, you did not want to notify me for fear I would snatch away your meritorious service."

"What is there to be snatched away?" the Empress Dowager asked, "So what if I have meritorious service or not? I only hope to go through one year in peace and security, without any problem." The tone of her voice was brimming with grudge and hatred.

If it were not for the fact that Wei Xiaobao knew it clearly that it was the Empress Dowager's voice, he would have thought it was an old palace maid complaining because someone was blaming her. The two of them were speaking in very low voices, but Wei Xiaobao was very near, plus there was no other noise in

the calm night, hence he was able to hear everything clearly. Hearing those two talking about 'snatching away some meritorious service', he knew the man was definitely not Emperor Shunzhi.

Wei xiaobao could not suppress his curiosity anymore, slowly he crawled to the window and peeked inside from a crack on the window. He had already had enough experience standing outside the window and peeping inside like this at the Lovely Spring Courtyard; he mused, "Before I was peeping the brothel patrons chasing my mother, tonight I am peeping the old wh0re receiving a patron."

He saw the Empress Dowager was leaning sideway, sitting on a chair, and a palace maid was pacing back and forth in the room with hands behind her back; other than these, there was no other person inside. "Where did that man go?" he thought.

He saw the palace maid turned around and said, "I can't wait, I am going out to look." As soon as she opened her mouth, Wei Xiaobao jumped in fright, because the palace maid had a male's voice, it was she who had just spoken. From the crack on the window Wei Xiaobao could only see her chest, but not her face.

"I am coming with you," the Empress Dowager said.

With a cold laugh the palace maid said, "You don't feel at ease."

"Why wouldn't I feel at ease?" the Empress Dowager said, "I suspect Ah Yan is doing something strange, by working together, it will be easy for the two of us to control her."

"Hm, we can't not guard against that," the palace maid said, "Don't let the boat capsize in the gutter. Alright, let's go."

The Empress Dowager nodded, she walked toward the bedside, lifted the bedding open, and pulled a piece of wooden board. There was a flicker under the candle light, a dagger appeared in her hand. She insert the dagger into its sheath and

put it inside her pocket. Wei Xiaobao thought, "Turns out the old wh0re has such a secret compartment. To guard against assassination, she did not have the dagger inside the sheath, so that with one grab she could make a kill, no need to pull the dagger from its sheath. In such a critical moment, she would not lose precious split seconds."

He saw the Empress Dowager and the palace maid walked out of the bedroom, unlatched the palace gate, and left the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, but the candle in the bedroom was not extinguished. Wei Xiaobao thought, "I'll put these pig's feet in that secret compartment on her bed, when she returned the dagger, she would grope this pair of pig's hooves. I guarantee she will be scared out of her wits."

Thinking that this plan was indeed ingenious, he sneaked into the room, lifted the bedding up, and saw a small copper ring on the bed board. He reached down and pulled, a wooden plank, about one *chi* wide and two *chi* long, rose up smoothly. Underneath he saw a rectangular secret compartment. Astonishingly, there were three books inside, the books were precisely the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra' that he had seen before. The first two were the copies he got from Oboi's mansion, only the jade box where the books were originally kept was missing. The other copy had a white silk envelope. From what he heard that night when Hai Laogong was talking to the Empress Dowager, he mentioned that Emperor Shunzhi gave a copy to Consort Donggo as a gift; the Empress Dowager must have took it after she killed Consort Donggo. Wei Xiaobao decided it must be this copy.

He was greatly delighted. "I don't know what the fart these books are for," he thought, "But everybody seems to regard it so highly. *Laozi* might as well leading away the goat in passing, so that the old wh0re will be angered to half-dead." Immediately he took the three sutras and stuffed them inside

his pocket. And then he shook Liu Yan's feet from the long gown to let the feet fall into the secret compartment. He put the wooden plank back and replaced the bedding. Kicking the long gown underneath the bed, he was about to turn around and leave when he suddenly heard the creaking noise of the door; someone was pushing the door and coming in.

This time he was really scared out of his wits, he did not expect the Empress Dowager and that palace maid to be back this quickly. Having not enough time to think, he ducked and crawled under the bed, while groaning in his heart. He only hoped that the Empress Dowager had simply forgotten something and came back to get it, and would quickly go out again to look for him, he also hoped that whatever it was that she had forgotten was not kept in the secret compartment under the bedding.

He heard the footsteps were light and quick, one person was entering the room, it was a woman. The woman was wearing a pair of light green shoes, her pants were also light green. Looking at the style of the pants, it seemed to him that she was a palace maid. "It must be the palace maid who is waiting on the Empress Dowager," he thought, "She knows martial art, so she can't be Rui Chu. If she does not leave immediately, I might have to kill her. It will be best if she came to the front of the bed." Drawing the dagger quietly, he waited for the palace maid to come to the bed. With one thrust up from below, he could stab her lower abdomen, then he could guarantee that she would lose her life without knowing any rhyme nor reason.

He heard her opening the drawers, opening the cabinet doors, moving and turning things, as if she was looking for something, yet all along she did not come near the bed. Then Wei Xiaobao heard some ripping noise, apparently she had used some sharp weapon to cut open two chests. Wei Xiaobao was startled. "This woman is not an ordinary palace maid; she came to the

Empress Dowager's room to steal something. Could it be that she is here to steal that 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'? She has a sword or a saber in her hand, looks like her martial art skill can't be inferior to *laozi*; if I go out, not only I can't kill her, I am afraid I will be killed first by her."

He heard the woman was randomly rummaging the chest, she also cut open three more chests on the west and searched around. Wei Xiaobao did not stop cursing her in his belly, "If you are not leaving, the old wh0re may come back soon. I don't care if you want to deliver your life away, but you might drag Wei Xiaobao along to return to the heaven together; you think you have that much face?"

Failing to find whatever she was looking for, the woman was very anxious, she rummaged the chest even faster. Wei Xiaobao was thinking of surrendering, "It would be better for me just to toss these sutras to her, so that she would leave in a hurry."

Right this moment, there were footsteps outside the door, he heard the Empress Dowager said in low voice, "I say that s1ut Liu Yan took the sutra and left."

The woman also heard the voice; it was too late for her to escape, she quickly entered the wardrobe and closed the door.

The palace maid with a man's voice said, "Did you really send Liu Yan to fetch the sutra? How would I know you are not lying to me?"

"What did you say?" the Empress Dowager said angrily, "Did you say I did not send Liu Yan to fetch the sutra? So what did I send her out for?"

The palace maid said, "How would I know what trick you are playing? Perhaps you were following Liu Yan closely and killed her."

The Empress Dowager snorted angrily, she said, "Aren't you

ashamed, being my *Shixiong* yet say some brainless thing like that? Liu Yan is my *Shimei*, you think I have such guts to kill her?"

The palace maid coldly said, "You are indeed brazen, vicious and merciless, what matter you can't do?"

The two of them spoke in very low voice, but in the quiet night every word could be heard clearly. Hearing the Empress Dowager called the palace maid her *Shixiong* and Liu Yan her *Shimei*, Wei Xiaobao was even more puzzled. The two of them were talking as they entered the room. As soon as they saw the chests were cut open and various objects scattered over the floor, 'Ah!' they cried out in shock together.

"Someone was here to steal the sutra," the Empress Dowager shouted. She rushed toward the bed, flipped the bedding over, and pulled the wooden board. Seeing the sutras were gone, she cried out, "Aiyo!" And then she saw Liu Yan's pair of cutoff feet. "What is that?" she cried in alarm.

The palace maid reached out and picked the feet. "These are women's feet," he said.

The Empress Dowager was scared, "It's Liu Yan, she ... she has been killed," she said.

With a cold laugh the palace maid said, "I wasn't wrong, was I?"

The Empress Dowager was startled and angry at the same time, "What do you mean you weren't wrong?"

The palace maid said, "You are the only one in the world who know the secret hiding place of these books. If it was not you who killed Liu *Shimei*, how can her feet end up here?"

The Empress Dowager angrily said, "You are still accusing me blindly in here? The sutra thief can't leave too far, let's quickly pursue him."

"Correct," the palace maid said, "Perhaps this person is still in the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful. You ... are you sure you are not playing trick?"

The Empress Dowager did not reply, she turned around and looked at the wardrobe. Step by step she walked toward it, apparently she began to have suspicion toward the wardrobe.

Wei Xiaobao's heart almost jumped out of his throat; the dagger in her hand reflected the flickering light from the candle, the reflection flitted across the floor, presumably the Empress Dowager was opening the wardrobe door with her left hand, while holding the dagger in her right hand. If the dagger was thrust into the wardrobe, undoubtedly the palace maid inside would not be able to evade.

He saw the Empress Dowager was taking a step closer that she was now less than two *chi* away from the wardrobe. Suddenly 'crash! bang!' the wardrobe toppled over toward the Empress Dowager. The Empress Dowager was caught off guard, hastily she leaped backward, quite a few clothing of every color flew out of the wardrobe, some landed and wrapped around her head. The Empress Dowager hastily reached out to grab, a piece of clothing was thrown onto her body, suddenly she screamed pitifully, while a dagger, dripping with blood, appeared from within the clothing. Turned out someone was hiding inside the bundle of clothing. The palace maid inside the wardrobe threw clothing to the Empress Dowager so that she was at a loss, and then with one strike she succeeded in stabbing her.

At first the palace maid with a man's voice seemed to be watching with blank expression on his face, only after hearing the Empress Dowager's miserable scream did he send a palm strike toward the bundle of clothes. Wei Xiaobao saw the bundle of clothes rolled away rapidly, the palace maid wearing green clothes leaped out of the bundle of clothes, with a blood-soaked dagger in her hand she pounced toward the palace maid with a

man's voice. The palace maid with a man's voice sent out another palm strike, the palace maid wearing green clothes leaned sideways to evade, and then immediately pounced on the enemy again.

From under the bed, Wei Xiaobao could only see those two persons' four feet. The palace maid with a man's voice was wearing grey pants and black satin shoes. The feet wearing green shoes were swiftly advancing and swiftly retreating, the feet wearing black shoes only occasionally took one step forward, and one step backward. The two people were engaged in an intense battle, but Wei Xiaobao did not hear any clashing of the weapons, obviously the palace maid with a man's voice did not have any weapon. Wei Xiaobao cast a sideways glance toward the Empress Dowager; he saw her lying on the floor, motionless, apparently she had died.

He heard the whooshing noise of the palms. After the fighting had been going on for a while, suddenly he saw the room grew darker; one of the three candles had been blown out by the palm wind. Wei Xiaobao mused, "As soon as the other two candles are blown out, I am going to dash out in darkness."

'Whoosh!' another candle was extinguished by the palm wind. The two palace maids were fighting in silence, neither one dared to make the least bit of noise, as if both were afraid of alarming people on the outside. Actually, there were a lot of eunuchs and palace maids in the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, the ruckus had been going on for quite a while, somebody should have had come to check early on, but obviously these people were always under the Empress Dowager's strict order, without her summon, nobody dared to come over and spy on her.

Wei Xiaobao heard ‘Crack! Crack!’ as table and chair’s fragments flew everywhere, secretly he was apprehensive, “This palace maid who talks like a man seems to have a

profound martial art, the wind from his palms are everywhere, the table and chair that got hit are smashed."

Suddenly there was a light shout, followed by a flash of white light, and 'pop'; the palace maid wearing green clothes' weapon flew up from her hand and nailed itself on the roof. And then the two of them fell to the ground, wrestling each other into a tangled heap.

Now Wei Xiaobao could see clearly, the two combatants were unleashing their *qin na* skills, attacking and defending from each other within an area of several *chi* wide, each move was extremely dangerous. Wei Xiaobao's knowledge of other type of martial art was very limited, but his training in *qin na* was quite extensive, he had enough daily sparring with Kangxi. He saw the two palace maids were moving very fast, each attack was ruthless and fierce: gouging the eyes, pounding the chest, twisting the neck, locking the throat, sealing acupoints, cutting off arteries, hooking the wrist, striking with their elbows, not a single move was not attacking the enemy's vital point. Wei Xiaobao was secretly flabbergasted, "If it were me, I would have cried out 'surrender' long ago!"

Wei Xiaobao's heart was beating in sync with the two people's palms and hands movement, his only thought was, "Why hasn't that candle gone out yet?" He was fully aware that those people were entangled in a very tight battle, even if he was crawling out from under the bed in full view, walking out the door with grandiose, the two palace maids would have been no more than stunned to a certain degree, nobody would try to stop him; it's just that he could not muster enough courage to do just that.

Suddenly the last candle flickered, a female voice grunted, the candle flickered back to light, he saw the palace maid wearing grey pants was pinning down the palace maid wearing green pants, her right elbow was pressing down the palace maid wearing green pants' throat. The palace maid wearing green

clothes' left arm was suppressed by the enemy that it was hard for her to attack, her right hand made repeated attempts to hook, hit, seize and jab, but was always parried by the opponent's left hand. Her throat was crushed by the enemy, she was gasping for breath with difficulty, the movement of her right hand gradually slowed down, both of her legs kicked up frantically, it looks like very soon she was going to be strangled to death by the enemy.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "As soon as this grey-clothes palace maid strangled the opponent, she would look under the bed to find the sutra. Wei Xiaobao will turn into Wei Sibao[48]!" Without giving himself any time to think, he sprang up from under the bed, raising the dagger in his hand, and thrust it into the palace maid wearing grey clothes' back, and pushed it upward, slicing a very long gash, and then leaped back immediately.

The palace maid wearing grey clothes shouted loudly and sprang up, pouncing on Wei Xiaobao, her hands grabbed Wei Xiaobao's neck and tightened the grip as hard as she could. Clutched by her hands, Wei Xiaobao's tongue stretched out, bursts of blackness appeared in his eyes. The palace maid wearing green clothes flipped over and jumped up, her right palm fell ferociously down on the left side of the palace maid wearing grey clothes' neck, and then using her left hand she grabbed her hair and pulled it backward. Suddenly her hand felt loose, she had pulled the palace maid wearing grey clothes' entire hair away, revealing a bald head. Turned out it was only a wig. Right this moment the palace maid wearing grey clothes' hands came loose, off of Wei Xiaobao neck. Her own neck twisted several turns, and then she fell to the ground in a heap, while blood gushing out of her back, right away her life had left her.

Still gasping for breath, the palace maid wearing green clothes

said, “Thank you Xiao Gong-gong, for saving my life.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded. He was still shaking from fear, while stroking his own neck. With his left hand he pointed to the palace maid wearing grey clothes’ bald head and said, “She … she …”

The palace maid wearing green clothes said, “This man dressed as a woman and mingled in the Palace.”

Suddenly someone was shouting outside the door, “Help, there’s assassin in here!” The voice was half male, half female, it was a eunuch.

With her right hand the palace maid wearing green clothes seized Wei Xiaobao, broke the window and leaped out. Her left hand waved, ‘puff!’ followed by a miserable ‘ah!’, the eunuch was hit by a secret projectile and fell down on the ground.

The palace maid wearing green clothes wrapped her left hand around Wei Xiaobao’s waist to lift him up off the ground and take him rushing northward, going passed the Western Three Places and entered the Yang Hua Gate. By this time Wei Xiaobao was quite a lot taller than when he first entered the Palace, he was quite heavier too. This palace maid in green clothes was more or less the same height as he was, and she was slim, but when rushing forward while carrying him, it was as if she was carrying a baby, she did not show that she was expending the slightest effort. “Good skill!” Wei Xiaobao praised.

The palace maid carried him via a small path winding around the Yuhua Pavilion, Baohua Palace Hall, and arrived at the bank of burning ground by the Fujian Palace[49], before she finally let him down. The burning ground was near the Xi Tie [Western Iron] Gate, it was where the trash and waste from the Palace was incinerated, it was extremely secluded in the evening.

“Xiao Gong-gong,” the palace maid in green clothes asked, “What’s your name?”

“I am Xiao Guizi!” Wei Xiaobao replied.

“Ah!” she exclaimed, “You are the Xiao Guizi Gong-gong who personally arrested Oboi, the Emperor’s most favorite Gong-gong.”

Wei Xiaobao smiled. “I don’t dare!” he said. Although he had seen this palace maid in the Empress Dowager’s bedroom, it was such in a rush that he did not have time to look at her carefully. He thought vaguely that she looked around forty years old. “*Jiejie*,” he said, “How must I address you?”

The palace maid hesitated slightly, then said, “You and I share fortune and calamity together, I can’t conceal it from you. My surname is Tao, people in the Palace call me Tao Gong’e. What were you doing under the Empress Dowager’s bed?”

Wei Xiaobao said whatever came into his head, “I am under the Emperor’s imperial edict to catch the Empress Dowager’s fornication!”

Tao Gong’e was slightly startled. “Did His Majesty know that palace maid was a man?” she asked.

“His Majesty knew a little bit, but he is not too sure,” Wei Xiaobao replied.

“I … I killed the Empress Dowager,” Tao Gong’e said, “Very soon the commotion will turn the sky and the earth, the Palace gates will be shut, there will be great search. I must leave the Palace immediately. Gui Gong-gong, we’ll meet again someday.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “The old wh0re finally went to the netherworld to become a wh0re, now I can live in peace and quiet in the Palace, but if they close the Palace gates and launch a great search, Fang and Mu, two girls will face certain disaster; what shall I do?” A bright idea suddenly occurred, “Tao

Jiejie," he said, "I have an idea. I am going to report to His Majesty immediately, I will say that I witnessed that fake palace maid killed the Empress Dowager, but the Empress Dowager had also killed the fake palace maid; the two of them fought until they perished together. The Empress Dowager is dead anyway, she could not testify, you don't have to escape from the Palace."

Tao Gong'e hesitated for a moment, then she said, "This idea just might work. But what about that eunuch? Who killed him?"

"I will say it was the fake palace maid who killed him," Wei Xiaobao said.

"Gui Gong-gong," Tao Gong'e said, "This matter is very dangerous. Although His Majesty likes you, he will most probably kill you to shut your mouth."

Wei Xiaobao shivered. "His Majesty also wants to kill me?" he asked, "Why?"

Tao Gong'e said, "His mother had illicit relation with a man, if the rumor leaks out, how do you think His Majesty would react? Even if you guard your mouth like a closed bottle, each time His Majesty sees you, he would unavoidably feel ashamed. Sooner or later he would have to kill you."

Wei Xiaobao was scared. "He … is he that ruthless?" he asked. But in his heart he knew Tao Gong'e was right, he must never say anything about this to the Emperor.

Right this moment, from the south came several sounds of gong, followed by other gongs all around. It was the Palace' alarm system whenever there was fire or some other emergency; immediately all the Palace's Imperial Bodyguards and eunuchs were being dispatched.

"We can't get out now," Tao Gong'e said, "You go and pretend to join the hunt for the assassins, I will go back to my room and sleep." Stretching out her left arm, she wrapped it around Wei

Xiaobao's waist and took him off westward, toward the Yinghua Palace Hall, and put him down by the Palace. "Be careful!" she said in soft voice. Turning around, she disappeared behind a corner.

Wei Xiaobao was worried over Fang Yi and Mu Jianping, hastily he went toward the room where the two of them were hiding. He heard the sound of gongs was getting increasingly urgent, followed by the clamor of people shouting everywhere. Desperately he ran toward the room. "It's me!" he shouted.

Fang and Mu, two girls were already frightened that their faces were drained of blood. "What's that gong?" Mu Jianping asked, "Are they coming to arrest us?"

"Not that," Wei Xiaobao replied, "The old wh0re is dead! People are shouting and jumping over everywhere. We'd better return to my room, it's relatively safer there."

"Return to your room?" Mu Jianping said, "We … we killed someone there …"

"Don't be afraid," Wei Xiaobao said, "They don't know about it. Quickly go!" He bent down to help Fang Yi; grabbing his bundle with his left hand, he rushed outside.

The three of them staggered along as they rushed forward for a while, they saw from a fork on the pathway several Imperial Bodyguards were rushing toward them. The leader raised up his torch and shouted, "Who's there?"

"It's me," Wei Xiaobao shouted back, "You must go quickly to protect His Majesty. Is there a fire[50]?"

The guard recognized Wei Xiaobao, hastily he handed the torch over to the guard beside him. With hands by his side he respectfully said, "Gui Gong-gong, I heard something bad happened at the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful."

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "You go first, I'll come soon after."

The Imperial Bodyguard bowed and said, “Yes!” Leading his men, he left.

Mu Jianping said, “They seem to be very afraid of you. And just now I said we were bad.” While saying that, she struck her own chest repeatedly.

Wei Xiaobao wanted to crack some jokes, to toot his own horn, but he was concerned over the disturbance caused by the Empress Dowager’s death, he wondered what would the aftermath be, he was panic-stricken and could not think of any joke. Along the way they met another group of Imperial Bodyguards before finally arrived at his own residence. Luckily Fang Yi and Mu Jianping were wearing eunuch attire, plus the Imperial Bodyguards were such in a frantic mode that nobody paid any attention to them.

Wei Xiaobao said, “The two of you stay here, whatever happens, do not change your clothes.” Putting his bundle into the chest, he left after locking the door behind him, and rushed to the Palace of Heavenly Purity, where Kangxi’s personal chamber was located.

Chapter 15
Alliance undergoing concern over the wind and the rain, with a casual order roaming the extensive Rivers and Mountains.
(Translated by Foxs)

At the teahouse Wei Xiaobao was chatting endlessly with Fang and Mu, two ladies; the three of them did not feel like leaving each other. Suddenly they heard Xu Tianchuan shouted, "Good friend, you still don't want to reveal your true colors until now?" He stretched out his hand to strike the shoulder of a carriage driver on the

right.

Hearing the sound of gongs, Kangxi draped his clothes over his shoulder and got up, an Imperial Bodyguard came to report that something bad had happened in the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, but as for the details, he was not clear. Kangxi was feeling anxious when Wei Xiaobao came in; he hurriedly asked, "Is Empress Dowager well? What happened?"

Wei Xiaobao replied, "The Empress Dowager told your servant to retire to my own room for the night, and to come back tomorrow to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful. Who would have thought ... who would have thought something bad happened in the Palace. I don't know what it is, your servant is trying to find out."

"I am going to pay my respect to the Empress Dowager," Kangxi said, "You come with me."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Kangxi was very filial to the queen mother, without changing clothes, he draped a long robe over his shoulder and hurriedly went out the door. While walking quickly he asked, "Empress Dowager wanted you to serve her, why did you come to my place?"

"Your servant heard the sound of gongs, I was concerned over Your Majesty's safety, so I rushed over," Wei Xiaobao replied, "I really ... really deserve to die."

As soon as Kangxi left his bedroom, the eunuchs around him, as well as a large number of Imperial Bodyguards, followed him, more than a dozen lanterns were lighted all around them. He noticed Wei Xiaobao's clothes and hair was in a complete mess, but how could he guess that it was because Wei Xiaobao had been crawling underneath the Empress Dowager's bed? He thought it was because of his loyalty in protecting his master, his wholehearted concern over the Emperor's safety that

without having enough time to change properly, he rushed to the Emperor's room; Kangxi was quite pleased and was reassured.

Walking several more *zhang* ahead, two Imperial Bodyguards rushed over and reported, "The assassins broke into the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, they killed an eunuch and a palace maid."

Kangxi hurriedly asked, "Was the Empress Dowager's sacred self being disturbed?"

"Dolong *Zongguan* has already had the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful surrounded tightly to protect the Empress Dowager," the Imperial Bodyguard replied. Kangxi was slightly relieved.

In his heart, Wei Xiaobao said, "Even if he led a hundred thousand troops and horses to protect the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, it's already too late."

It was not too far from the Palace of Heavenly Purity to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful; they arrived after winding around the Hall of Mental Cultivation and the Taiji [Supreme Ultimate] Hall. They saw the area was as bright as daytime with lanterns and torches, row after row of several hundred Imperial Bodyguards surrounded the Palace, perhaps even a mouse would not be able to pass through, let alone any assassin. Seeing the Emperor, the Imperial Bodyguards kneeled down together. Kangxi waved his hand while quickly entered the Palace. Wei Xiaobao lifted the curtain on the door. Kangxi walked through the door and saw the chests, baskets, and all kinds of stuffs scattered around the bedroom, blood flowed everywhere, two corpses lay on the floor; he was so scared that his heart was thumping madly. "Empress Dowager, Empress Dowager!" he called.

From the bed came the reply in low voice, "Is it the Emperor?

Don't worry, I am alright." It was the Empress Dowager's voice.

To say that Wei Xiaobao was mildly shocked was an understatement; he thought, "The old wh0re did not die. I was really muddleheaded, why didn't I stab my dagger onto her body? She is not dead, I may be dead soon." Turning his head around, he was thinking of running away, but outside was fully packed with the Imperial Bodyguards; if he ran away, in less than three steps he would have been captured by them. In his fright his legs went weak, his head dizzy, he felt he was about to collapse.

Kangxi rushed toward the bed and said, "Empress Dowager, you, Senior, were frightened. Child was not able to protect you satisfactorily, it was a grave sin indeed. Those rice bucket Imperial Bodyguards must be punished severely."

Panting, the Empress Dowager said, "No ... nothing. It was just an eunuch and a palace maid fighting ... they ended up killing each other. It has nothing to do with the Imperial Bodyguards."

"Is the Empress Dowager well?" Kangxi asked, "Has it alarmed you?"

"It hasn't!" the Empress Dowager replied, "I was just angry looking at those servants. Emperor, you may leave; tell everybody to go away."

Kangxi said, "Quickly summon the imperial physician to check the Empress Dowager's pulse." Wei Xiaobao was hiding behind him, he did not dare to comply, for fear that the Empress Dowager would see him, or recognize his voice as soon as he opened his mouth.

The Empress Dowager said, "No, don't summon the imperial physician, I will feel better after sleeping. You don't need to move these two people's ... these two servants' bodies ... My heart is really troubled, I don't want to hear people making

noise in here. Emperor, tell ... tell everybody to leave quickly." Her voice sounded very weak, she was gasping for breath, obviously the injury she received was not light.

Kangxi was very anxious, but he did not dare to disobey. Actually, he wanted very much to investigate thoroughly why these eunuch and palace maid fight, so that the Empress Dowager was this angry. Although the two of them had died, they had committed such a big crime that their family members must be examined. However, listening to the Empress Dowager, it was obvious that she did not want this matter to be made public, so much so she did not even allow the bodies to be removed. He had no choice but to pay his respect to the Empress Dowager and withdrew from the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful.

Having narrowly escaped from mortal danger, Wei Xiaobao's legs were still weak, holding on to the wall, he also walked out. Kangxi was busy thinking with his head down, he thought that what happened tonight in the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful was quite major, there must be a secret in it, but the Empress Dowager clearly did not want him to get involved. Only after walking with head hung low for a good while did he finally look up and saw Wei Xiaobao was following behind him. "The Empress Dowager wanted you to serve her," he said, "Why are you following me here?"

Wei Xiaobao was thinking that come daybreak he was going to run away from the Palace anyway, hence he felt there was no harm in him saying whatever came into his mind. "The Empress Dowager has just said that her heart is really troubled, she would be angry at the sight of an eunuch. Seeing the Empress Dowager’s holy self is not too well, your servant thought that it would be better to leave her so that she won’t be annoyed.” Kangxi nodded.

Returning to his personal chamber at the Palace of Heavenly

Purity, he waited until all the eunuchs serving him had withdrawn before saying, “Xiao Guizi, stay here!” Wei Xiaobao complied.

Kangxi paced back and forth from east to west and back from west to east. After quite a while he asked, “What do you think, why did that eunuch fight the palace maid to their deaths?”

“I may not be able to guess correctly,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “There are so many palace maids and eunuchs with very bad temper in the Palace, they quarrel frequently, sometimes they fight in secret, it’s just that they never let the Empress Dowager and Your Majesty know.”

Kangxi nodded. “Go tell everybody not to mention this matter anymore to avoid provoking the Empress Dowager’s anger,” he said.

“Yes!” Wei Xiaobao replied.

Kangxi said, “You may go!”

Wei Xiaobao paid his respect, turned around and left, thinking, “This time I leave, I will never see you again.” He turned his head around to cast another glance at Kangxi.

Kangxi was also looking at him with a smiling expression on his face. “Come back here,” he said. Wei Xiaobao turned around and walked back. Kangxi opened a golden box by the head of his bed and took out two pieces of pastry. “We have been busy for half a day, your tummy must be very hungry!” he said with a laugh, and then gave the pastries to him.

Wei Xiaobao received the pastries with both hands, thinking that the Empress Dowager was dangerously ruthless, she concealed a man in her bedroom; there would come a day where she would harm the Emperor, while the Emperor was kept in the dark inside a drum, he did not know anything. The Emperor treated him very well, just like a friend or a brother, if he did not make the Emperor aware of this matter and he was

killed by the Empress Dowager, Wei Xiaobao thought he was really lacking *yi qi*. Thinking to this point, a vision appeared in his mind, in which all the muscles and bones in Kangxi's entire body were broken, his corpse lying on the ground in a miserable condition. His heart ached, he could not hold tears from flowing out of his eyes.

"What is it?" Kangxi asked with a smile, he reached out and patted Wei Xiaobao's shoulder, saying, "You want to be with me, don't you? That's easy; wait till the Empress Dowager is feeling better in a few days, I will talk to the Empress Dowager. To be honest, I also do not want to lose you."

Wei Xiaobao was overwhelmed with excitement; he thought, "Tao Gong'e said that if I tell the Emperor the truth, he would unavoidably want to kill me to shut my mouth. A hero or a warrior can do anything, but has no choice but to uphold *yi qi*. If a real man must die, so be it." Placing the two pieces of pastry on the table, he grabbed Kangxi's hand and with a trembling voice said, "Xiao Xuanzi, can I call you Xiao Xuanzi again?"

Kangxi laughed and said, "Of course you can. I have already said that whenever there's nobody else around, we will be just like in the past. You want to have a martial art contest, don't you? Come, come, come, let the horse come out." While saying that, he flipped his hands to grab Wei Xiaobao's hands.

"There's no hurry to have a martial art contest," Wei Xiaobao said, "I have a secret important matter I want to tell my good friend Xiao Xuanzi. I simply cannot tell my master, the Lord of Ten Thousand Years, if His Majesty hears it, he will immediately chop my head. But Xiao Xuanzi is my friend, so it is alright."

Kangxi did not know the gravity of this matter; in his young frame of mind, he only felt that this was all very amusing. Hurriedly he pulled Wei Xiaobao to sit side-by-side on the bed and said, "Tell me quick, tell me quick!"

Wei Xiaobao said, “At this moment you are Xiao Xuanzi, and not the Emperor?”

Kangxi smiled. “Right,” he said, “Right now I am your good friend Xiao Xuanzi, not the Emperor. I have been the Emperor all day long, without any really caring friend; there is no fun in that.”

“Alright,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I’ll tell you everything. If you want to chop my head, I can’t do anything about it.”

Kangxi smiled and said, “Why would I want to chop your head? How can a good friend kill his good friend?”

Wei Xiaobao took a very deep breath, and then said, “I am not the real Xiao Guizi, I am not a eunuch, I killed the real Xiao Guizi.”

Kangxi was flabbergasted. “What?” he asked.

And so Wei Xiaobao briefly narrated his family background and his origin, followed by how he was captured and brought to the Palace, how he poisoned Hai Dafu that he turned blind, how he pretended to be Xiao Guizi, how Hai Dafu taught him martial art; he explained everything in detail.

Listening to this part, Kangxi laughed and said, “Damn it, take your pants off, let me see.”

Wei Xiaobao knew that the Emperor was astute, how could he not personally verify this kind of important matter? He took off his pants immediately.

Seeing Wei Xiaobao really had not been purified to be a eunuch, Kangxi laughed aloud and said, “Turns out you are not a eunuch. Killing the little eunuch Xiao Guizi is not that serious. It’s just that you can’t live in the Palace anymore. Otherwise I would assign you to be the Chief of the Imperial Bodyguards. Although that servant Dolong's martial art is not bad, the way he handles his affairs is very muddleheaded."

Wei Xiaobao buckled up his pants and said, "I thank you very much for that, but I am afraid it won't work. I have heard some secrets relating to the Empress Dowager."

"Related to the Empress Dowager?" Kangxi asked, "What is it?" When asking that question, there was a nagging feeling in his heart that something was not right.

Wei Xiaobao clenched his teeth and started to recount what he heard that night at the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, when the Empress Dowager was talking to Hai Dafu. When he heard that his father, the Emperor Shunzhi, had not died but had become a Buddhist monk at the Qing Liang Temple on Mount Wutai, Kangxi's shock was not a small matter. This delight particularly had made him as if he was jolted and was giddy with excitement. He was shaking all over as he grabbed Wei Xiaobao's hands and with a trembling voice said, "Is this ... is this really true? My *Fu Huang* [father emperor] ... *Fu Huang* is still alive?"

"It was exactly what I heard from the Empress Dowager and Hai Dafu," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Kangxi stood up and loudly shout, "That's ... that's marvelous! Marvelous! Xiao Guizi, come daybreak, we will go immediately to Mount Wutai to have an audience with *Fu Huang*, we will invite him, Senior, to return to the Palace."

Kangxi ruled the land under the heavens, in everything he could do as he wish, his only regret in life was that his father and mother died prematurely. Sometimes in the middle of the night the memory of when his father and mother were still alive came back to him in a dream, and he could not bear but shedding some tears and weep. This moment, after listening to Wei Xiaobao, although unavoidably he had some doubt, he was so happy that his heart was turned upside down.

"I am afraid the Empress Dowager would not approve," Wei

Xiaobao said, "All along she concealed it from you, there must be an important reason behind it."

"That's true," Kangxi said, "What reason that might be?" When he first heard that his father had not died, the delight had clouded his inner feelings, but as he thought about it further, countless doubts started to emerge.

Wei Xiaobao said, "I don't understand anything about any important matters in the Palace, I can only repeat word for word everything that the Empress Dowager and Hai Dafu were saying."

"Yes, yes!" Kangxi said, "Tell me quick, tell me quick!"

Hearing about how Empress Duan Jing and Empress Xiao Kang were harmed, Kangxi sprang up and shouted, "You ... are you saying that Empress Xiao Kang was ... was murdered?"

Seeing Kangxi's expression underwent huge changes, his eyes were bulging, the muscles on his face were continuously twitching, Wei Xiaobao could not help but was scared; with a trembling voice he said, "I ... I don't know, I was only repeating what Hai Dafu told the Empress Dowager."

"What did they say, exactly?" Kangxi asked, "You ... repeat the whole thing."

Wei Xiaobao had a very good memory, when he recounted the exchange between the Empress Dowager and Hai Dafu that night, even his intonation was very much alike those two people.

Kangxi was staring blankly for half a day; he said, "My own mother ... my own mother was unexpectedly murdered by others?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Empress Xiao Kang is ... is ... is your mother?"

Kangxi nodded. "You may continue," he said, "Do not omit a

single sentence." His heart was broken, tears flowing down his face.

Wei Xiaobao then recounted how the murderer had used the ‘Transforming Bones Soft Palm’ to kill Empress Duan Jing's son, Prince Rong, and then murdered Empress Duan Jing and Consort Zhen. After Emperor Shunzhi left home to become a Buddhist monk, the Empress Dowager murdered Empress Xiao Kang. He also recounted how the undertaker who prepared Empress Duan Jing and Consort Zhen for burial had accepted Hai Dafu's order to visit the Mount Wutai and report everything to Emperor Shunzhi, how Emperor Shunzhi had sent Hai Dafu back to the Palace to make thorough investigation, and finally how the Empress Dowager and Hai Dafu had exchanged some palm strikes. He did not dare to say that it was he who killed Hai Dafu, he only said that because Hai Dafu was blind, he was not the Empress Dowager's match, so that he died under her palms.

Kangxi calmed himself down, then he asked in detail what happened that night; he often cross-examined Wei Xiaobao by repeatedly asking the same question, until he was convinced that Wei Xiaobao could not possibly make up the story. He looked up in deep thought for a while, and then asked, "Why did you wait until today to tell me all these things?"

"The implication of this matter is too great," Wei Xiaobao replied, "How can I dare to make irresponsible remarks? But tomorrow I am going to run away from the Palace, I won't come back; I thought that it will be very dangerous for you to be alone in the Palace, so I can't conceal it from you anymore."

"Why do you want to go out of the Palace?" Kangxi asked, "Are you afraid the Empress Dowager will harm you?"

"Let me tell you this," Wei Xiaobao said, "The palace maid who died at the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful tonight was a man, he was the Empress Dowager’s *Shixiong*.”

The fact that a palace maid in the Empress Dowager’s palace was actually a man was naturally unthinkable, but tonight Kangxi had just learned that his father, the late Emperor, unexpectedly was not dead, plus his own mother was murdered by the Empress Dowager, whom he had always had solemn affection to. When he heard that a palace maid was actually a man in disguise, he did not feel strange at all; besides the little eunuch in front of him turned out to be a fake eunuch. “How do you know?” he asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “After I listened to the Empress Dowager and Hai Dafu that night, the Empress Dowager always wanted to kill me to shut my mouth.” Thereupon he told Kangxi everything, how the Empress Dowager had sent Rui Dong, Liu Yan, as well as groups of eunuchs one after another to kill him. He also related how he heard the Empress Dowager was talking to a man at the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, how that man, who disguised himself as a palace maid, was killed by the Empress Dowager, but the Empress Dowager also suffered injury. Naturally he did not tell the whole truth; he did not mention Tao Gong'e, neither did he mention anything about him killing Rui Dong and Liu Yan, and him stealing several copies of the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra', and so on.

"That man was the Empress Dowager’s *Shixiong*?" Kangxi muttered to himself, "From the tone of his voice, it seems that the Empress Dowager was forced to accept someone else's order, I wonder who that person might be? Could it be ... could it be that person knew there was a fake palace maid in Empress Dowager's bedroom, and thus ..."

Listening to Kangxi touching upon the subject of Empress Dowager's 'adultery', Wei Xiaobao did not dare to open his mouth, he only shook his head. It was only a moment later that he said, "I don't have any idea."

"Summon Dolong here," Kangxi said.

Wei Xiaobao complied, he thought, "Is the Emperor going to deal with the Empress Dowager? Is he going to order Dolong to arrest the old wh0re and behead her? Shall I run away as quickly as possible? Or should I stay and help him?"

Dolong was just burning with anxiety; there was accident after accident in the Palace. Although the head above his neck might not be removed, the hat above his head, and the plume above his hat, might be highly unstable. Hearing that the Emperor had summoned him, he hastily came to the Palace of Heavenly Purity.

Kangxi instructed him, "There is nothing at the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, you may immediately withdraw the Imperial Bodyguards all around the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful. The Empress Dowager says that hearing the Imperial Bodyguards standing outside, her heart is very much troubled."

Dolong noticed that although the Emperor's expression looked rather strange, he did not say even half a word of blame. Dolong was ecstatic, he busily kowtowed and went out to transmit the order.

Kangxi's heart was still filled with all kinds of suspicion; he asked Wei Xiaobao a lot of detailed questions. After a long time, he presumed all the Imperial Bodyguards had been withdrawn. He said, "Xiao Guizi, you and I will scout around the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful tonight."

"Are you going to personally scout around?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Exactly!" Kangxi said. First, it was a matter of great importance, he could not simply listening to a little eunuch impersonator's one sided story and suspected the queen mother who raised him up; second, 'dangerous night spying mission' was something that people who learn martial art must

do. Now that an opportunity had presented itself, how could he let it off easily? He was the Emperor, he could not go out of the Palace to test his skill, being a 'nightwalker' in the Palace was better than nothing. It's just that he had already ordered the Imperial Bodyguards around the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful to be withdrawn, so that when he did the 'night mission', it could not be compared to 'wulin professionals'.

Wei Xiaobao said, "The Empress Dowager has already killed her *Shixiong*, right now she is sleeping peacefully to nurture her injuries, I am afraid we won't find anything."

"We haven't gone scouting, how do you know we won't find anything?" Kangxi said. Immediately he changed into a casual dress, and wore a pair of thin-soled light boots, it was precisely the same attire he always wore when he had martial art contest against Wei Xiaobao. He fetched a *yaodao* saber[51] from the head of his bed and hung it on his waist, then they went out from the Palace of Heavenly Purity's side door.

Numerous Imperial Bodyguards and eunuchs were standing in layer upon layer on guard duty around the Palace of Heavenly Purity, as soon as they saw the Emperor, they all kneeled down hurriedly. Kangxi ordered, "Everybody stand, no one is allowed to move randomly." It was the Emperor's imperial edict, who would dare to disobey? Therefore, more than two hundred Imperial Bodyguards and eunuchs were standing straight on their original position, nobody dared to move.

Kangxi took Wei Xiaobao to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful's garden. It was very quiet, nobody was around. He crawled under the Empress Dowager’s bedroom window and crouched down to listen attentively. He heard the Empress Dowager was coughing incessantly, in that instant, his feeling bubbled up like a tide, it was a mixture of sorrow, bitterness, and excitement. Hearing the Empress Dowager’s coughing, he

felt like he wanted to rush in and cry in her bosom, but he also wanted to wrap his fingers around her neck and interrogate her sternly: what actually happened to his father and his own queen mother? For a moment he hoped that everything Xiao Guizi told him was a lie, but he also hoped that it was entirely the truth. He did not stop shaking, all the hair on his body stood up on its end, a slight chill penetrated his bone and marrow.

The candle in the Empress Dowager's bedroom was still burning, it flickered continuously, making the paper on the window pane sometimes bright, sometimes dark. After a while, he heard the voice of a palace maid saying, "Empress Dowager, I have finished sewing."

"Hmm," Empress Dowager said, "Put this palace maid … palace maid's body inside … inside the quilt sack."

"Yes," the palace maid said, "What about the eunuch's body?"

The Empress Dowager angrily said, "I only told you to wrap the palace maid, why do you … do you care about any eunuch?"

"Yes!" the palace maid busily said. And then they heard the noise of something was dragged along the floor.

Kangxi was unable to show restraint any longer, he craned his neck to peep through the crack on the window, but all the cracks on the Empress Dowager's bedroom window had been sealed with greased lime, not even a narrow slit existed. In the former days, he had heard Wei Xiaobao's story about the trick and taboo of the nightwalker of the Jianghu, which was passed on by Mao Shiba along the way from Yangzhou to Beijing. Now, seeing the window was without any crack, which was what he had expected, immediately he moistened his finger with his saliva and lightly wet the window paper, exerting a light force on his finger, he made a tiny hole on the window without making the slightest bit of noise.

Through the hole he could see the embroidered screen on the Empress Dowager's bed was hanging low, a young palace maid was trying to stuff a body on the ground into a big cloth sack. The corpse was wearing palace maid attire, but the head was completely bald that it did not have even a single strand of hair. After stuffing the corpse into the sack, the palace maid picked up a wig from the floor. After hesitating for a moment, the palace maid also stuffed the wig into the sack; with a low voice she said, "Empress Dowager, I have finished … finished wrapping!"

The Empress Dowager said, "Have all the Imperial Bodyguards outside with drawn? I seem to hear some voices."

The palace maid went to the door, looked out for a while, and then said, "There's nobody outside."

The Empress Dowager said, "Drag the sack to the lotus pond, put four large rocks into the sack, use … use string … (cough, cough) to tie the sack's mouth, and then … and then … (cough, cough) push the sack into the pond."

"Yes," the palace maid replied, her voice trembled, obviously she was very afraid.

The Empress Dowager said, "After you push the sack into the pond, dig up a lot of dirt and toss it on top of the sack, don't let anybody see it."

"Yes," the palace maid replied again, and then she dragged the sack out of the room and to the flower garden.

Kangxi thought, "Xiao Guizi said that that palace maid was a man, most likely he was right. If there was no huge secret surrounding this matter, why must the Empress Dowager sink the corpse into the pond to erase any trace of it?" Seeing Wei Xiaobao was standing by his side, he could not refrain from reaching out to grab his hand. Both of them felt the other's hand was moist and cold.

A moment later they heard splashing noise as the sack containing the body fell into the lotus pond, followed by the sound of mud and dirt thrown into the pond. Another moment later the palace maid returned to the bedroom. Wei Xiaobao had already recognized her voice, she was Rui Chu, the little palace maid.

“Is everything done?” the Empress Dowager asked.

“Yes,” Rui Chu replied, “Everything is done.”

The Empress Dowager said, “There were originally two corpses in here, how come the other one suddenly disappear? If someone asks you tomorrow, how are you going to explain?”

Rui Chu said, “Your servant … your servant does not know anything.”

“You are serving me in here, how can you not know anything?” the Empress Dowager said.

“Yes, yes!” Rui Chu said.

“What do you mean ‘Yes, yes!’?” the Empress Dowager angrily said.

With a trembling voice Rui Chu said, “Your servant saw that dead palace maid stood up, turns out she was only injured, she did not die at all. She slowly … slowly walked out. That time … that time the Empress Dowager was sleeping peacefully, your servant did not dare to alarm the Empress Dowager, I saw the palace maid walked out of the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, I don't know ... I don't know where she went."

The Empress Dowager sighed and said, "So that's what happened. Amitabha Buddha, she is not dead but walked out on her own. That's very good."

"Exactly," Rui Chu said, "Thank the Heaven and thank the Earth, she is not dead."

Kangxi and Wei Xiaobao waited a moment longer, the Empress Dowager did not speak anymore, she seemed to fall asleep; therefore, they quietly, step-by-step, left and returned to the Palace of Heavenly Purity. They saw the Imperial Bodyguards and eunuchs were still standing straight, motionless. Kangxi laughed and said, "Everybody can move as you wish!" Although he was laughing, the sound of his laughter and his speech was very dry and heavy.

Back to his bedroom, he fixed his gaze on Wei Xiaobao and did not say anything for a long time. Suddenly tears flowing down his face, he said, "Turns out Empress Dowager ... Empress Dowager ..." Wei Xiaobao was at a loss of what to say.

Kangxi thought for a moment longer, then he clapped his hands, two Imperial Bodyguards appeared on the bedroom door. Kangxi said in a low voice, "I have a secret mission I want the two of you to do, but you must never leak it out. There is a large sack in the lotus pond in the garden of the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful, I want the two of you to bring it here. The Empress Dowager is sleeping peacefully, if you two make the least bit of noise and awaken the Empress Dowager, you will lose your own heads." The two guards bowed in compliance and left. Kangxi was still sitting on his bed, silently pondering everything over and over in his head.

A good half a day[52] later, finally the two Imperial Bodyguards, lifting a dripping wet big cloth sack, came back outside the bedroom door.

"Did you wake up the Empress Dowager?" Kangxi asked.

The two Imperial Bodyguards replied together, "Your servants do not dare."

Kangxi nodded. "Bring it in!" he said. The two Imperial Bodyguards complied, they brought the cloth sack in. "You are dismissed!" Kangxi said.

Wei Xiaobao waited until the Imperial Bodyguards had left, and then he closed and bolted the door before untying the rope on the sack's mouth and dragging the corpse out. Although the corpse's face was clean-shaven, the hair roots were clearly visible. There was a lump on the corpse's throat, and its chest was flat, undoubtedly it was a male. The muscles on this man's entire body were bulging, his knuckles were protruding, a sure sign of someone who had an extensive training in martial art. Apparently this man masquerade a palace maid in the Palace only recently, otherwise, with this kind of appearance, which was ugly even for a man, how could he masquerade as a palace maid and not being discovered?

Kangxi drew out his *yaodao* and cut open the man's pants. After taking a glance, his anger rose; brandishing his saber repeatedly, he chopped the part between the corpse's loins into a pulp.

Wei Xiaobao said, "The Empress Dowager ..."

"What Empress Dowager?" Kangxi angrily said, "That s1ut forced my *Fu Huang* to leave, murdered my mother, defiled the imperial court with illicit sexual relations, and did many injustice. I ... I want to cut her body into ten thousand pieces and execute her whole family unto the third generation."

Wei Xiaobao heaved a deep sigh; immediately he felt relieved, "The Emperor no longer recognize her as the Empress Dowager, whatever bad things that old wh0re has done, I know everything, he can't possibly kill me to shut my mouth."

Kangxi raised his saber and hacked the corpse several more times, momentarily his indignation was difficult to endure. He was thinking of sending some Imperial Bodyguards to detain and interrogate the Empress Dowager, but then he had a second thought, "*Fu Huang* is not dead, but became a monk on Mount Wutai; this is a very important matter. As soon as this information leaks out, it will create quite a sensation among the

officers and common people of the world. I must not act recklessly." Thereupon he said, "Xiao Guizi, early tomorrow morning, I will go with you to Mount Wutai to verify the truth."

"Yes!" Wei Xiaobao replied. He was extremely delighted. Traveling together with the Emperor, going to Mount Wutai was definitely more fun than being stifled in Beijing.

But Kangxi's knowledge, experience and understanding was far above Wei Xiaobao's, after a careful consideration, he immediately remembered that when the Emperor was going on an inspection tour, it was an extremely grand occasion, which would require at least several months of preparations. Along the way, hundreds of government officials must be prepared to welcome and protect the Emperor; it would be a lot of trouble, he could not simply go whenever he wanted to. He also remembered his own young age, he had not taken over the government for too long, the princes, dukes, and the ministers of the imperial court had not submitted to him yet; if the Empress Dowager seized the opportunity while he was out of the Capital to seize the government and usurp power, he should consider that she might oust him and set up another ruler in his place. Moreover, if his father emperor was in fact dead, or perhaps he was still alive, but was no longer on Mount Wutai, while with much fanfare he went up the mountain to seek an audience, but failed to see the old Emperor, not only he would be the laughingstock of all the people in the world, but he would be ridiculed by the later generations as well.

After thinking for a while, he shook his head and said, "It's no good, I can't casually leave the Capital. Xiao Guizi, you must go for me."

Wei Xiaobao was quite disappointed, "I must go alone?" he asked.

"You must go alone," Kangxi said, "Wait until we investigate clearly that *Fu Huang* is indeed on Mount Wutai, I will fix a good

way to deal with that s1ut in the Capital, then the two of us will go up the mountain together. It's a completely safe plan."

Wei Xiaobao thought that since the Emperor already decided to deal with the Empress Dowager, he could not easily decline to go alone to Mount Wutai for an inquiry. "Alright," he said, "I'll go to Mount Wutai."

Kangxi said, "According to our Great Qing's customs, an eunuch cannot leave the Capital unless he is accompanying me. It's good that you are actually not a court eunuch. Xiao Guizi, later on you won't be a eunuch anymore, you'd better be an Imperial Bodyguard. However, everybody in the Palace has already known you, if you suddenly cease to be an eunuch, they will feel strange. Um, I can declare to the people that in order to capture Oboi, you received my order to disguise yourself as a eunuch. Now that the prime criminal has been eliminated, naturally the masquerade cannot continue. Xiao Guizi, in the future you must study a bit, I will appoint you as a high-ranking official."

"That's nice!" Wei Xiaobao said, "But I have a headache as soon as I see a book. I will study a little bit less, then you can appoint me as a little bit lower-ranking official."

Kangxi sat in front of the table, he raised his writing brush and started to write a letter to his father the Emperor: he reported clearly that he had been unfilial, that only today he learned that *Fu Huang* was still alive, that his heart was unusually happy, that he would go up the mountain in the next few days to respectfully welcome the Emperor's holy self back to the Palace, to again manage the ten thousand affairs of the state, while the son would also receive a parent’s favor once again. But after thinking several more lines of characters, he suddenly thought, “If this letter fell into a wrong hand, it would be greatly inappropriate. If Xiao Guizi got captured or even killed, this letter could be found by others.”

He took the sheet with half a page already written, and burned it over the flame of the candle, and then he took up his writing brush and wrote: “Imperial edict: the Imperial Bodyguard Deputy Chief Wei Xiaobao, hereby being granted by the Emperor himself to wear Yellow Magua[53], is being sent to visit the Wutai Mountain region on official business. Various provinces’ civil and military officials are ordered to give assistance. By the Emperor himself.” Finished writing, he affixed the imperial seal and handed it over to Wei Xiaobao, saying with a laugh, “Now you are an officer, take a look, what officer are you?”

Wei Xiaobao opened his eyes wide, but all he could recognize was his own name, the character ‘five’ [‘wu’ from wutai], ‘one’ [‘yi’ from ‘yidai’ – region], and ‘civil’ [‘wen’ from ‘wenwu’ - civil and military], six characters altogether. But he only recognized the character ‘wei’ and ‘bao’ of his name simply because they came on either side of the character ‘xiao’, if they were standing alone, he would not have recognized them. He shook his head and said, “I don’t know what officer. It is personally appointed by Your Majesty, so it can’t be a petty official, can it?”

Kangxi laughed and read the imperial order. Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue and said, “It’s Deputy Chief of the Imperial Bodyguards; awesome, awesome! And I get to wear the Yellow Magua?”

Kangxi smiled and said, “Although Dolong is the Chief, he does not get to wear the Yellow Magua. If you handle this assignment well, when you return to the Palace I will promote your official position. It’s just that you are still too young, if your position is too high, it would be too unseemly. We’ll do it slowly.”

“High-ranking or low-ranking official, I don’t care,” Wei Xiaobao said, “As long as I can be with you frequently, it would

be very good.”

Kangxi was both happy and sad, he said, “You must be very careful, your mission is top secret, if not absolutely necessary, do not show this imperial edict to anybody. You may go now!”

Wei Xiaobao bade Kangxi farewell, he saw a streak of marble white color of the dawn on the eastern horizon. He returned to his residence, quietly opened the door and came in. Fang Yi had not slept at all. “You are back,” she said happily.

“Everything is fine[54],” Wei Xiaobao said, “We can leave the Palace now.”

Mu Jianping woke up in a daze, “*Shijie* was very anxious,” she said, “She was afraid you ran into danger.”

Wei Xiaobao smiled and asked, “What about you?”

“Of course I was worried too,” Mu Jianping said, “Are you alright?”

“I am alright, I am alright,” Wei Xiaobao replied.

They heard the noise of activities, the Palace gates were opened, one after another the civil and military officials entered the Palace to wait for the morning court. Wei Xiaobao lighted the candle on the table, he examined the two girls’ attire and did not find any flaw; he laughed and said, “The two of you are too pretty, you need to rub some dirt on your face.” Mu Jianping was somewhat reluctant, but seeing Fang Yi reached down to the ground to get some dirt and rubbed it on her face, she followed suit.

Wei Xiaobao put the three copies of sutra he snatched from under the Empress Dowager’s bed into his bundle. He took the silver hairpin from his pocket and handed it over to Fang Yu, saying, “Is this the hairpin you were looking for?”

Fang Yi blushed, she slowly held out her hand to take it,

saying, “You are willing to brave danger, it was to … was to fetch this hairpin of mine.” Her heart was touched, her eyes turned red, she turned her head to look another way.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “It’s not that dangerous.” While in his heart he said, “This is called ‘good deed has its own reward’. If I did not go to get this hairpin, I would not get to wear the Yellow Magua.”

He took the two people toward the back of the imperial city and left the Palace via the Shen Wu Gate. By this time the sky had not brightened, the Imperial Bodyguards at the gate only saw Gui Gong-gong with two little eunuch companions going out of the Palace. Other than uttering some flattering words, who would dare to ask a single question?

After leaving the Palace for a dozen of *zhang* or so, Fang Yi turned her head around to look back at the Palace gate, all sorts of feelings welled up in her heart, everything she underwent seemed to happen a lifetime ago.

On the street, Wei Xiaobao hired three sedan chairs, he told the porters to go westward toward the Chang’an Street, where they alighted and took another small sedan chair to Tian Di Hui, about two streets away, where they finally got off. He said, “Your Mu Palace friends have all left the city yesterday. I must consult my friends to see where we must send you.” After being bestowed the title Imperial Bodyguard Deputy Chief wearing Yellow Magua, he was conscious that he had become a grownup, moreover, he was under an imperial edict on mission to investigate an enormously important matter, suddenly he felt like he must shed the glib-tongue way he used to talk. Besides, his Shifu was not far away, he did not dare to act wantonly.

Fang Yi asked, “You … where are you going?”

“I do not dare to stay in Beijing much longer,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I must go, the farther the better. I must wait until the

Empress Dowager is dead, all is calm, then I will dare to come back."

"We have good friends in Shijiazhuang, Hebei," Fang Yi said, "If you … if you don't look down on us, why don't you … why don't you come with us to temporarily make yourself scarce?"

"That's right," Mu Jianping said, "You are the benefactor who saved our lives, you are one of us. If the three of us travel together, it will be somewhat more fun." The two of them looked at him with hopeful eyes. Mu Jianping looked naïve and earnest, but Fang Yi looked shy.

If Wei Xiaobao did not bear an important mission, accompanying two beautiful women on a long journey would, by far, be more interesting, would be extremely free and unfettered; but this moment he had no choice but would have to think of a way to make an excuse. He said, "I promised a friend to handle a very important matter for him, I cannot go to Shijiazhuang at this time. Both of you are injured, it would be inconvenient for two young ladies to hasten on with your journey. I will ask one or two reliable friends to escort you to go first. Let us rest for a while, eat until we are full, then we can talk it over slowly."

Presently they arrived at Tian Di Hui's lodging. As soon as the brother guarding outside the lane saw that it was him, he quickly led them in. Gao Yanchao went out to greet them; he was very surprised to see he was accompanied by two little eunuchs. Wei Xiaobao whispered in his ear, "It's the Mu family's *Xiao Gongye*'s sister, the other one is her *Shijie*. I saved them out of the Palace."

Gao Yanchao invited the two ladies to take a seat in the hall and served them tea. He pulled Wei Xiaobao to the side and said, "*Zongduozhu* has left the Capital last night."

Wei Xiaobao was delighted; first, he was most afraid Shifu

would inquire about the progress of his martial art training, second, he was not sure whether he should confide with Shifu about Kangxi's order. Hearing Shifu had already left the Capital, it was as if a large rock was lifted off of his mind. But on his face he showed an utmost disappointment. He stomped his foot and said, "This … this … this … Ay, why did Shifu have to leave so quickly?"

Gao Yanchao said, "*Zongduozhu* instructed subordinate to inform Wei *Xiangzhu* that he, Senior, suddenly received an urgent report from Taiwan, and must hurry back there to handle the matter. *Zongduozhu* wanted Wei *Xiangzhu* to be very careful, to act as circumstances dictate. If it is inconvenient for you to stay at the Palace, you must leave the Capital to escape temporarily. He also said he wanted Wei *Xiangzhu* to diligently train martial art. He was wondering if the poison inside Wei *Xiangzhu*'s body has been completely cleared up, if you feel something is not right in your body, you are to let *Zongduozhu* know immediately."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao said, "Shifu keeps thinking about my injury and martial art training, I am deeply grateful." It was not a false statement, hearing in his rush Shifu was still thinking about his well-being, he was deeply touched. "What happened in Taiwan?" he asked.

Gao Yanchao replied, "I heard the mother and son of the Zheng family are at odds with each other; they killed a minister, probably there is an internal strife. *Zongduozhu* has quite a prestige, whatever the turmoil over there, he, the Senior, will be able to settle it as soon as he arrives, Wei *Xiangzhu* does not need to be anxious. Li *Dage*, Guan *Fuzi*, Fan *Dage*, Feng *Dage*, Priest Xuanzhen, and the others are coming with *Zongduozhu*. Xu *San Ge* and subordinate are staying in the Capital to wait for Wei *Xiangzhu*'s orders."

Wei Xiaobao nodded and said, "Get someone to invite Xu *San*

Ge over.” He thought, “Not only the ‘Eight-arm Ape’ Xu Tianchuan has superior martial art skill, he is very astute, and is an old man. No one is better than him to escort these two ladies to Shijiazhuang.” He also thought, “The mother and son in Taiwan are at odds with each other and killed people. They are no different than the Empress Dowager and the Emperor in Beijing.”

He returned to the hall to eat some noodles and dimsum with Fang and Mu, two girls. Mu Jianping ate less than half a bowl of noodles, she could not bear not to ask, “Are you sure you can’t come with us to Shijiazhuang?”

Wei Xiaobao cast a glance toward Fang Yi; she stopped her chopstick and she stopped to eat. She was looking down, but her eyes were filled with earnest hope. Wei Xiaobao could not restrain his heart from burning; he really wished he could take these two girls with him to Mount Wutai, but immediately thought better: “What kind of important mission am I in? Taking these two injured young ladies will be a hindrance and will draw unnecessary attention, which absolutely must not happen.” Thereupon he sighed and said, “After my business is done, I will come to Shijiazhuang to visit. Where does your friend live? What’s his name?”

Fang Yi slowly lowered her head and pinched a string of noodle with her chopsticks, but did not put it in her mouth; she said in a low voice, “That friend opened a mule and horse dealership at the Shijiazhuang’s western market. He is called the ‘Fast Horse’ Song San [lit. Song the third].”

“Fast Horse Song San, got it,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I will definitely come to visit you.” Suddenly a mischievous look appeared on his face, as he casually said, “How can I not come? How can I give up this pair of ‘bashful flower obstructing the moon’ first wife and second wife?”

Mu Jianping laughed and said, “You have been well-behaved

only for less than half a day, and you are back to your flippant and glib-tongued way already?”

Fang Yi firmly said, “If you really regard us as your good friends, we … we will hope for your visit every day. But if you are being frivolous and won’t respect others, you … you don’t need to come.”

Wei Xiaobao had bumped into a nail; he only felt the fun had been lost. “Alright,” he said, “If you don’t like to banter, I won’t say anything at all.”

Fang Yi was somewhat apologetic, she said in a gentle voice, “Even bantering has its own propriety, its own time, and its own place. You … are you angry?”

Wei Xiaobao cheered up, he quickly said, “No, no. As long as you are not angry, I am fine.”

Fang Yi laughed, and then gently said, “Toward you, nobody can be really angry.”

Fang Yi was smiling so sweetly that even though her face was smeared with dirt, her beauty was very difficult to cover. Wei Xiaobao immediately felt a burst of warmth going through his body, he ate mouthful by mouthful of noodle soup and temporarily could not find anything to say.

Suddenly they heard footsteps in the courtyard, an old man walked in, Xu Tianchuan had arrived. He went straight to Wei Xiaobao and bowed to pay his respect, there was only happiness across his face, as he respectfully said, “How are you, Senior?” He was being very discreet, seeing there were outsiders present, he did not address Wei Xiaobao as ‘Wei *Xiangzhu*’.

Wei Xiaobao cupped his fist to return the salute and said with a laugh, “Xu *San Ge*, let me present to you two friends. These two are ‘Iron Back Blue Dragon’ Liu *Laoyezi*’s distinguished disciples. This one is Miss Fang, this one is Miss Mu, she is Mu

Palace's Xiao Junzhu." To Fang and Mu, two girls he said, "This is Xu *San Ge*, he is acquainted with Liu *Laoyezi* and your family's *Xiao Gongye*." He was afraid Fang and Mu, two ladies still harbor a grudge, so he quickly added, "At first there was a tiny bit of grudge between them, but presently the resentment has been resolved." After the three of them had exchanged propriety, he said, "Xu *San Ge*, I have a favor I'd like to ask you."

Hearing that these two women who were disguised as little eunuchs were unexpectedly important personage of the Mu Palace, Xu Tianchuan thought that since Mu Jiansheng and the others already knew Wei Xiaobao's real identity, naturally these two young ladies were also well-informed of the fact; thereupon he said, "Whatever Wei *Xiangzhu* wishes to send me, subordinate will accept your orders."

But Fang Yi and Mu Jianping did not know Wei Xiaobao's real identity. Hearing Xu Tianchuan addressed him as 'Wei *Xiangzhu*', they were greatly surprised.

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, "These two young ladies had the same fate as Wu Lishen, Wu *Laoyezi*, and Liu Yizhou Liu *Dage*, they had fallen into the enemy's hands inside the Imperial Palace; they came out just now. Have Mu Family's *Xiao Gongye*, Liu Yizhou *Shixiong* and the others left the Capital?"

Xu Tianchuan said, "Numerous heroes of the Mu Palace have left the Capital safely yesterday. Mu *Xiao Gongye* also asked me to make discreet inquiry on Xiao Junzhu's whereabouts. I asked him to set his heart at ease, since he has entrusted this matter to Tian Di Hui, we will definitely find Xiao Junzhu." While saying that, there was a hint of smile on his face.

Mu Jianping asked, "So Liu *Shige* is with my *Gege*?" She asked that question on Fang Yi's behalf.

Xu Tianchuan replied, "*Zaixia* sent them off out of town separately. Liu *Shixiong* went with Liu *Laoyezi*, they were

heading south.” Fang Yi blushed as she lowered her head.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “Hearing your sweetheart is out of danger, your heart must be in full bloom.” Little did he know that this time his guess could not be more wrong. The thought in Fang Yi’s mind was: “I gave him my words that if he saved Liu *Shige*’s life, I would marry him and be his wife, and will be steadfast to the death. But he is a court eunuch, how can I marry him? He is very young, but can pull a hundred tricks. What’s this ‘Wei *Xiangzhu*’ business anyway?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “These two young ladies strenuously fought the Imperial Bodyguards in Qing Palace, and have suffered injuries. Presently they want to go to a friend’s house in Shijiazhuang to recuperate from their wounds. I am thinking of asking Xu *San Ge* to accompany them.”

Xu Tianchuan was delighted, “I ought to serve in this capacity,” he said, “Wei *Xiangzhu* has given me a very good assignment. Subordinate has wronged the Mu Palace’s friends, but Mu *Xiao Gongye* has saved my life instead, I am very ashamed in my heart. If I can accompany these two young ladies to their destination safe and sound, I can somewhat repay one out of ten thousand kindness he had shown me.”

Mu Jianping cast Xu Tianchuan a glance, what she saw was a small and thin old man with a bent waist and a hunched back, someone who could give up his ghost any minute. He talked about escorting her and her older martial sister, perhaps along the way they would have to look after him instead. Much less Wei Xiaobao did not go, so she was already quite disappointed. She was unable to restrain the disappointment from appearing on her face.

But Fang Yi said, “In all honesty, we do not dare to trouble Xu *Laoyezi*’s honorable self, we only asked you to hire a large carriage for us, and then we will be off on our own. Our injuries are nothing serious; you really do not need to take the trouble.”

Xu Tianchuan laughed and said, “Miss Fang does not need to be too polite. Wei *Xiangzhu* has already issued the order, whatever happens I simply must accompany you. Both ladies are exceptionally skilful in martial arts, you really do not need an old man incurring your dislike on the side. This old man really does not have the ability to do this ‘accompany’ word. But I can run errands and do odd jobs like serving the ladies in finding an inn to stay, waiting on you for a snack during the journey, hiring carriage, buying stuffs, and do all kinds of tricks, so that along the way the ladies do not need to waste your time to deal with characters like mule dealer, carriage driver, inn waiters, shop attendants.”

Seeing she could not decline anymore, Fang Yi said, “We don’t know how to repay Xu *Laoyezi*’s great kindness.”

Xu Tianchuan laughed aloud. “What is there to repay?” he said, “I am telling the two ladies the truth: my admiration towards our Wei *Xiangzhu* shows no bound. Don’t look at his young age; in reality, he has an extensive divine ability. Not only he has saved my old life, just yesterday he helped this old man vented my anger. I was just thinking in my heart, how can I handle several matters for him to express my gratitude, who would have thought that today he is sending me on an assignment? Even if the two ladies do not allow me to accompany you, this old man will have no choice but be tactful; I will precede you on your journey to manage your trip, to open a way when you come across a mountain, to build a bridge when you meet a river, to wait upon you until you arrived at Shijiazhuang safe and sound. Let’s not mention from Beijing to Shijiazhuang is only a few days journey, even if Wei *Xiangzhu* ordered the old man to follow the two ladies all the way to Yunnan, I will simply go, I will accompany you to your destination.”

Mu Jianping noticed that although his appearance looked

wretched, his speech was actually very charming. “What anger he helped you vent yesterday?” she asked, “Yesterday, he … was he not in the Imperial Palace?”

Xu Tianchuan laughed and said, “That traitor Wu Sangui has a dog official under his command called Lu Yifeng. He kidnapped the old man, beat me up and insulted me; he also took a medicated plaster and stuck it on my mouth. Luckily your esteemed older brother sent people to save me and take me out. Wei *Xiangzhu* promised me that he would have someone break this dog official’s legs. I thought that this time Wu Sangui’s dog son came to Beijing, the number of capable people he brought along must be very great. Last time that servant Lu Yifeng has suffered some trouble from me, he would know better than to go out alone, it would not be easy for us to seek revenge. Who would have known that at the Zhong De Tang [lit. Hall of Virtue Cultivation] drugstore of the western town district yesterday I met a doctor friend specializing in external injury, who mentioned that the Ping Xi Wang dog den was sending people out, carrying a dog official everywhere to find an injury doctor. I found this matter to be really strange, they went to see injury doctors one after another; a total of twenty, thirty doctors, but they did not let those doctors to treat him. They only told the doctors that this dog official was called Lu Yifeng, a muddleheaded scoundrel. Ping Xi Wang’s dog son personally took a stick and broke both of his dog legs, and wanted him to suffer the pain for seven days and seven nights, without allowing him to be treated.”

Fang Yi and Mu Jianping were completely baffled; they asked Wei Xiaobao, “Where’s the logic in that?”

“That dog official has offended Xu *San Ge*,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Naturally we want him to suffer a lot of pain.”

Mu Jianping asked, “Why did the Ping Xi Wang dog den’s people bring him everywhere to let everyone know?”

“That kid Wu Yingxiong wanted people to pass the news to me,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “I told him to break that dog official’s legs, he wanted me to know that he has completed the task.”

Mu Jianping was even more puzzled, “Why did he obey you?” she asked.

With a smile Wei Xiaobao replied, “I was just talking rubbish, I lied to him and he believed me.”

Xu Tianchuan said, “Originally I wanted him to die a horrible death, but then I thought that this dog official was being carried around like a prisoner being paraded through the streets, with his legs broken without he was allowed to seek treatment; it would be too easy for that servant if I killed him. Yesterday afternoon I finally saw him with my own eyes, 9 out of 10 of that dog's life has gone, his pants were rolled up, exposing his two broken legs, swelling and purple. He was so much in pain that he cried, calling on his mommy. Ladies, won't you say it gives this old man reason to be delighted?"

By this time Gao Yanchao had returned with three large hired carriages, waiting outside the door. He was also a competent member of Tian Di hui, but according to the Society's law - a violation of this law was punishable by beheading, if it was not absolutely necessary, the less they reveal their true colors the better. Therefore, he did not appear before Fang and Mu, two ladies.

Wei Xiaobao deliberately considered, "In my bundle I have a total of five copies of 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra', I do not have the slightest idea what these books are for, but there were so many people staking their lives to steal and rob these books, so there must be a great reason behind it. If I bring them along while I am hastening on with my journey, I might lose them." After pondering for half a day, he finally found a solution. He called Gao Yanchao over and spoke to him quietly, "Gao *Dage*, I had a good brother in the Palace who was killed by the Tatars'

Imperial Bodyguards. I brought his ash out to give him a proper burial, could you send someone to buy a coffin?"

Gao Yanchao complied. He assumed that since Wei *Xiangzhu*'s good friend was killed by the Tatars, he must be a patriot in the resisting Qing movement, thereupon he personally selected a top quality coffin made of Liuzhou wood. He knew that this Wei *Xiangzhu* was really extravagant, from the three hundred *taels* given to him, he still had more than thirty *taels*, so other than the coffin, he also bought some burial clothes, earthen jar for the ashes, lime, silk paper, oilcloth, spirit tablet, spirit banner, ritual paper money, and everything else needed for burial; all were top quality products. He also bought several sets of men's clothing, shoes and hats for Fang and Mu, two ladies, to change into, as well as dry rations, cake and pastries for the journey. He also ordered a coroner and a lacquerer. By the time all the goods were delivered, Wei Xiaobao and the two ladies had already been asleep for four hours.

Preceding the others, Wei Xiaobao changed into an ordinary man's attire. He mused, "I am on a mission to Mount Wutai on an imperial order, I might be very busy, how can I find time to train martial art? I must not let Shifu's martial art manual to be stolen." Thereupon he wrapped the five copies of the sutra along with his Shifu's manual inside layer upon layer of oilcloth completely and tightly. And then he went to the kitchen to get a big handful of firewood ash and put it inside the earthen jar, thinking, "It would be best if there was a real corpse inside the coffin, so that even if someone opens the coffin to look, there won't be any suspicion. But in such a short period of time, I can't find a bad person to kill." Therefore, he took some water and wiped it on his eyes and face, and then with a sorrowful expression he went to the rear hall, holding the oil cloth package and the urn of ashes with both hands. He put the oil cloth package and the urn of ashes in the coffin, and then he knelt down and cried loudly.

Xu Tianchuan, Gao Yanchao, as well as Fang and Mu, two ladies, were waiting in the main hall. Seeing him kneeling down and weeping bitterly, there was no suspicion in their hearts, they thought it was definitely his good friend's ashes; they also kneeled down to pay their respects.

Wei Xiaobao had seen how the deceased' family members returning propriety during a funeral service, he scrambled to the side of the coffin and kneeled down and kowtowed to return the four people's respect. In a moment the coroner placed the silk paper, lime and other things in the coffin, and nailed the coffin's lid. The lacquerer then began painting.

Gao Yanchao asked, "What is the patriot's honored surname and great name? It would be better if we paint his title on the coffin."

"He ... he ... he ..." Wei Xiaobao was sobbing and sniffling continuously, while his mind was churning; he said, "His name was Shi Guidong." That is, Shi Song, Xiao Guizi and Rui Dong, three people's names put together; he thought, "I killed the three of you, right now I am kowtowing to you and burning some ritual paper money for your use in the netherworld. Shouldn't your wronged ghosts stop entangling me now?"

Seeing how bitter he was crying, Mu Jianping tried to console him, "Manchurian Qing Tatars killed our good friends; there will come a day we will kill them all, to avenge and wipe out the grudge of our good friends."

Still crying, Wei Xiaobao said, "Naturally the Tatars must be killed, but this good friend's enmity absolutely cannot be avenged."

Mu Jianping opened wide her pair of beautiful eyes; she looked at him in a daze while thinking, "Why not?"

The four of them rested for a while, then they took their leave from Gao Yanchao. Wei Xiaobao said, "Let me send you off for a

while." A happy expression appeared on Fang and Mu, two women's faces.

The two women rode on a large carriage, Wei Xiaobao and Xu Tianchuan separately took the other two carriages. The three carriages left from the Eastern Gate. After traveling eastwards for several *li*, they turned south. Seven or eight *li* later, they arrived in a small town at the outskirt of Beijing. Xu Tianchuan ordered the carriages to stop, he said, "Sending off the lord for a thousand *li*, in the end we must part. The day is no longer early, we will drink some tea in here and then take our separate way!"

They entered a roadside teahouse, the shop attendants promptly served them tea. The three carriage drivers sat on another table.

Xu Tianchuan assumed Wei *Xiangzhu* and his two companions would certainly have some personal matters they need to discuss; with hands behind his back he strolled out to enjoy the scenery.

Mu Jianping said, "Gui ... Gui *Dage*, you are actually surnamed Wei, aren't you? And what is a *Xiangzhu*?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed. "I am surnamed Wei," he said, "Given name Xiaobao; I am the *Xiangzhu* of Green Wood Hall of Tian Di Hui. This moment I can't no longer conceal it from the two of you."

"Ay!" Mu Jianping sighed.

"Why did you sigh?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"You are the *Xiangzhu* of Green Wood Hall of Tian Di Hui," Mu Jianping said, "How did ... how did you become a court eunuch in the Palace? Isn't that ... isn't that ..."

Fang Yi knew that she was going to say 'such a pity', but first, it was rather improper for her to say it out loud, second, she did

not want to arouse Wei Xiaobao's downheartedness; and thus she interrupted, "For the sake of our country's great cause, a hero and warrior does not hesitate to humiliate himself, indeed he is worthy of our complete admiration." She presumed Wei Xiaobao must have received Tian Di Hui's order to mutilate his own body and entered the Palace to be an undercover agent; he was definitely worthy of other people's admiration.

Wei Xiaobao showed a faint smile; "Shall I tell them that I am not a eunuch?" he mused.

Suddenly they heard Xu Tianchuan shouted, "Good friend, you still don't want to reveal your true colors until now?" He stretched out his hand to strike the shoulder of a carriage driver on the right.

Xu Tianchuan's right palm was just about to land on the carriage driver's shoulder, the carriage driver leaned sideways, Xu Tianchuan's right palm hit an empty air, but his left fist had already reached the carriage driver's right waist. The carriage driver flipped his hand to pull and push, and thus redirected the fist outwards. Xu Tianchuan then brought his right elbow to strike the back of the driver's neck. The carriage driver raised his right hand to feign a strike on the crown of Xu Tianchuan's head. If Xu Tianchuan continued his elbow strike toward the driver's neck, then it was as if he was delivering the top of his own head toward the man's palm. Immediately he exerted his strength on his feet and leaped backward. Altogether he had launched three moves: a palm strike, a punch and an elbow strike, all were delivered using a very swift and fierce technique, but unexpectedly the carriage driver was able to neutralize each move without too much trouble.

Xu Tianchuan was startled and angered at the same time; he expected this man to be a martial art expert from the Imperial Palace, who was acting under orders to arrest them. Immediately he waved his left hand to signal Wei Xiaobao,

three people, to run away quickly, while he himself entangled the enemy to give the three people an opportunity to get away. But how could those three forego *yi qi*? Fang Yi was injured, it would be difficult for her to fight. Wei Xiaobao and Mu Jianping drew their weapons and rushed forward in a converging attack.

The carriage driver turned around and said with a laugh, "The Eight-armed Ape has good eyesight!" His voice was rather sharp. The four of them saw that his face was yellow and swollen, his clothes were filthy, his overall appearance was ugly; momentarily they could not tell his age.

Hearing him calling his nickname, Xu Tianchuan was even more shocked; he cupped his fist and said, "Who are you, honored sir? Why do you impersonate a carriage driver and play tricks on *Zaixia*?"

The carriage driver said with a laugh, "I would never dare to play tricks. *Zaixia* and Wei *Xiangzhu* are good friends, knowing that he is leaving the Capital, I have come to send him off."

Wei Xiaobao scratched his head, “I … I can’t remember seeing you,” he said.

The carriage driver laughed and said, “Last night the two of us joined hands to fight a powerful enemy, how can you forget?”

Wei Xiaobao suddenly saw the light, “Ah,” he exclaimed, “You … you are Tao … Tao …” He inserted the dagger back into his boot, and rushed forward to pull her hand; only now did he know that the carriage driver was Tao Gong’e in disguise.

Tao Gong’e applied paste of butter, water and starch on her face, so it was difficult for others to know whether she was happy or angry, but her eyes were shining with delight as she said, “I was afraid the Tatars would send people to stop you, and thus I disguise myself to escort you for a while, unexpectedly Xu *Laoyezi* has a keen vision, I can’t deceive his eyes.”

Looking at Wei *Xiangzhu*’s expression, Xu Tianchuan knew this person was a friend and not a foe; he was delighted, but also ashamed. He cupped his fist and said, “Honored Sir’s martial art is superb, my admiration, my admiration! Wei *Xiangzhu* karma's is good, he always makes friends with martial art experts everywhere.”

Tao Gong’e laughed and said, “I don’t dare! May I ask Xu *Dage*, in my disguise, which part has revealed the flaw?”

"There was no flaw," Xu Tianchuan replied, "It's just that along the way I noticed the way honored sir waving the whip and urging the mule was unlike ordinary carriage driver. Honored sir did not move your wrist but the whip was extended very straight; you did not raise your elbow but the whip was pulled back immediately. I am afraid not too many friends among the carriage drivers in Beijing possess this kind of brilliant martial art." The five of them laughed heartily.

Xu Tianchuan continued with a laugh, "If *Zaixia* was more sensitive, seeing honored sir's martial art skill, I would not have dared to put out a hand to offend, it's just that this old man did not know what's good for me. I can't help it."

"Xu *Dage* has spoken discreetly," Tao Gong’e said, "I do not blame you at all."

Xu Tianchuan cupped his fist again. "I don't dare," he said, "May I know your honored surname and great given name?"

"This friend is surnamed Tao," Wei Xiaobao said, "With *Xiongdi* he has a ... a life and death friendship."

Tao Gong’e seriously said, "That's right, it's a life and death friendship. Wei *Xiangzhu* has saved my life."

Wei Xiaobao hurriedly said, "Why did Senior say that? We were cooperating to kill a scoundrel, that's all."

Tao Gong’e smiled. "Wei *Xiongdi*, Xu *Dage*, Fang and Mu, two

ladies," she said, "I bid you farewell." Cupping her fist, she leaped onto the driver seat of a large carriage.

"Tao ... Tao *Dage*," Wei Xiaobao called, "Where are you going?"

Tao Gong’e laughed and said, "From the place I come, to that place I will return."

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "Very well," he said, "I hope to see you again later." Straight away she drove the large carriage without saying anything else.

"Xu *Laoyezi*," Mu Jianping asked, "Is that man's martial art skill really high?"

"Superb martial art!" Xu Tianchuan said, "What's more amazing is that she is a woman."

"She is a woman?" Mu Jianping asked in surprise.

Xu Tianchuan said, "When she leaped onto the carriage, she swayed her waist from side to side, no doubt the style looked good, but unavoidably it looked sissy; she is definitely a woman."

"Her voice is too high," Mu Jianping said, "It did not sound like a man's voice. Wei *Dage*, is her ... her original appearance attractive?"

"Forty years ago, perhaps she was attractive," Wei Xiaobao replied, "But forty years later, you will still be much more attractive than she is now."

Mu Jianping laughed and said, "How can you compare me to her? Turns out she is a granny."

Recalling that very soon he would have to leave them, Wei Xiaobao could not help but feeling sad. Thinking that he was about to embark on a journey alone, he could not help but was somewhat afraid. From Yangzhou to Beijing he was travelling

together with Mao Shiba, a Jianghu veteran. In the Palace, although repeatedly running into danger, he knew almost everybody. In desperate moments, he often turned danger into safety by relying on his quick-wit. This time going to Mount Wutai in Shanxi, while admittedly he had never travelled this road before, what bothered him more was that he did not even know what the outcome of his mission would be. He had never travelled long distance alone; he was, after all, only a child, so it was hard for him to avoid feeling timid. For an instant he thought about going back to Beijing to ask Gao Yanchao to accompany him to Mount Wutai, but he remembered that this matter concerned Xiao Xuanzi's lot in life, if he let someone else know, he would be unfair to a good friend.

Xu Tianchuan only knew that Wei Xiaobao was going back to Beijing. "Wei *Xiangzhu*," he said, "It's getting late, please hurry back. If you are too late, I am afraid the city gate would have been closed."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Fang Yi and Mu Jianping said, "We hope after your business is done you would come to Shijiazhuang to see us. We will be waiting for you." Wei Xiaobao nodded, his heart was bitter-sweet, he could not say anything.

Xu Tianchuan invited the two women to get into the carriage, while he himself sat by the driver's side. The carriage started to move southwards. Wei Xiaobao saw Fang and Mu, two girls leaned out of the carriage and waved goodbye. The carriage travelled for about thirty *zhang*, then made a turn, and disappeared behind a row of red willow trees.

Wei Xiaobao mounted the remaining carriage. He ordered the driver to turn westward, not returning to Beijing. The carriage driver was somewhat hesitant, Wei Xiaobao took out ten *taels* of silver and said, "Ten *taels* to hire you three days, is it enough?"

The carriage driver was delighted; he busily said, "Ten *taels* is enough for even a month. *Xiaode* [the humble one, referring to self] will serve Master well; Master wants to go we'll go, Master wants to stop we'll stop."

That evening they stopped at a small town about twenty *li* southwest of Beijing, to rest and lodge for the night at a small family inn. Wei Xiaobao wiped his body and washed his feet; without waiting for dinner he lay down on the *kang*[55] and fell asleep.

When he woke up the next morning, he felt his head was about to crack, his eyes were heavy, he was not able to open it for a long time, his four limbs were even more limp and painful that he could move only with difficulty; it was as if he was in a nightmare. He wanted to shout, but nothing came out of his mouth. When he was finally able to open his eyes, he saw three men lying down on the floor. He was shocked and was only able to stare blankly for half a day. Calming himself down, he struggled to sit up, only to see someone was sitting in front of the *kang*, looking at him, smiling.

“Ah!” Wei Xiaobao exclaimed in surprise.

The person laughed and said, “Are you awake only now?” It was none other than Tao Gong’e.

Finally Wei Xiaobao was relieved. “Tao *Jiejie*, Tao *Gugu*[56], what … what happened?”

Tao Gong’e laughed and said, “Look, who are these three people?”

Wei Xiaobao crawled down from the *kang*, but his legs were soft, he fell kneeling down, but quickly sat up, then reaching out his hand for support, he managed to stand up. He saw the three people had already died for a while, but he did not recognize any of them. “Tao *Gugu*, did you save my life?”

Tao Gong’e laughed. “In the end, are you going to call me *Jiejie*, or *Gugu*?” she asked, “Just don’t call randomly, thus showing no respect for your elder.”

Wei Xiaobao also laughed. “You are *Gugu*, Tao *Gugu*!”

Tao Gong’e smiled and said, “You are traveling alone, next time you must be a bit more careful with what you eat and drink. If you were together with that eight-armed old monkey, you would not have fallen into these people’s trick.”

“Someone drugged me with knockout drug last night?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“More or less,” Tao Gong’e replied.

Wei Xiaobao thought for a moment, then he said, “Most likely it was the tea, when I drank it, there was a bit of sour taste, and a bit of sweetness too.” He thought, “I myself have a big bundle of knockout drug on me, but I ate other people’s knockout drug. Damn it, if I did not have a taste of knockout drug this time, how would I know it tastes bitter-sweet?” He then asked, “Is this a ‘black inn[57]’?”

“This is actually a white inn,” Tao Gong’e replied, “But when you came in, it turned black.”

Wei Xiaobao was still having a splitting headache, he put out a hand to hold his forehead and said, "I don't understand that one."

Tao Gong’e said, "Not long after you entered the inn, there were other people came in, they tied up the shop owners, husband and wife, and the inn attendant, and turned this white inn into a black inn. One of the men took the attendant's clothes and put some medicine powder into the teapot and delivered it to you. I saw you were changing clothes; I thought I would wait until you finished changing before giving you a warning. Unexpectedly, other than changing clothes, you were

also wiping your body. I waited for a moment before coming back, but you already drank the tea. Fortunately it was only knockout drug, not a poison."

Instantly Wei Xiaobao blushed from ear to ear; when he was wiping himself last night, he was fantasizing what would it feel like if Fang Yi really became his wife and he was embracing her tightly? At that time his emotion was surging, the situation was beyond his control. Although Tao Gong’e was not young anymore, she was, after all, a woman; looking at this kind of disgraceful situation from outside the window, naturally she could not bear to look too much.

Tao Gong’e said, "When we parted yesterday, I went back to the Palace, but I noticed inside and outside were peaceful without any commotion, there was no announcement about the death of the Empress Dowager, I felt very strange. After hurriedly changing my clothes, I went to the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful to look. I saw everything was as usual, turned out the Empress Dowager did not die. I know something was wrong. At first I thought the Empress Dowager had died, so the two of us can continue living in the Palace. But since last night we failed to kill her with a blade, we have no choice but must leave the Palace immediately. I wanted to rush over to tell you, so that you won't rush into the Palace and thus delivering your own life."

Wei Xiaobao pretended to be surprised. "Ah!" he exclaimed loudly, "Turns out the old wh0re did not die, it's very bad!" While in his heart he was ashamed, "In my haste yesterday, I forgot to mention this, I thought you already knew."

"I was just turning around to leave," Tao Gong’e continued, "I saw three Imperial Bodyguards walked out of the Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful. Their action was sneaky, I thought the Empress Dowager must have sent them out to arrest me, but I noticed they were not heading toward my

residence. I did not have time to pay them any more attention, I returned to my dwelling and packed up, I also changed clothes again, and slipped out of the Palace via the Catering Department's side door."

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, "Turns out Gugu dressed up as a Catering Department's sula." [see Chapter 13] The Catering Department had always used a lot of sula for odd jobs like chopping firewood, carrying coals, killing chickens, washing vegetables, lighting the stove, washing pots and pans, and so on. Practically all low-grade works were performed by sula. These sula were able to go in and out of the Catering Department, very few people would pay them any attention.

Tao Gong’e said, "As soon as I left the Palace, I saw those three Imperial Bodyguards again. They have changed clothes, they carried a bundle on their backs and rode on horses, obviously they were on a long journey."

"Ah," Wei Xiaobao exclaimed, he stretched out his left foot to kick a corpse, saying, "They must be these three friends who opened the black inn?"

Tao Gong’e smiled and said, "Actually, I should thank these three friends. If they did not lead the way, how could I find you? Who could have thought that you detoured westward? They left the city via the western gate and asked around along the way, if anybody had seen a thirteen, fourteen years old boy traveling alone. They really did receive the Empress Dowager's order to get you. By the evening, they found this place, so I followed them here."

Wei Xiaobao was very grateful in his heart; he said, "If *Gugu* did not save me, by this time I can't even answer Yanluo Wang's [Yama, King of Hell] question. He would ask, 'Wei Xiaobao, how did you die?' I would have to answer, 'Reporting to the Great King: I am muddleheaded, and can't make head or tail of it!'"

Tao Gong’e had lived deep inside the Palace for decades, normally very seldom did she had a chance to talk to someone else. She found Wei Xiaobao's talk very amusing talk. "This kid!" she said with a laugh, "Yanluo Wang would surely say, 'Drag him down and beat him up!'"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "But isn't it true? Lord Yanluo's beard would stick up, and he would shout, 'Being muddleheaded and can't make head or tail of it when you were alive is alright, how come after you die you are still muddleheaded? If all I have here are muddleheaded ghosts, won't I turn into muddleheaded Yanluo Wang?'" They both burst into loud laughter. "*Gugu*," Wei Xiaobao asked, "What happened next?"

Tao Gong’e said, "I heard them talking among themselves in low voice in the kitchen, one man said, 'The Empress Dowager's imperial order, it is best to capture this little demon alive, otherwise we can kill him with a slash of the saber; but the thing he has in his possession, we must bring it back at all cost, not a single one must be missed.' Another man said, 'This little demon dares to steal the Buddhist scripture the Empress Dowager reads every day, truly he is bored of living. No wonder the Empress Dowager is so angry. Empress Dowager instructed us that those several copies of scripture are the most important.' Xiao Xiongdi, did you really steal the Empress Dowager's Buddhist scripture? Your *Zongduozhu* ordered you to steal it, didn't he?" Saying that, she fixed her gaze on him without blinking.

Wei Xiaobao suddenly understood, "That's right, the object she was looking for in the Empress Dowager's bedroom must be those several copies of 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'." But on his face he feigned a perplexed expression, "What Buddhist scripture?" he asked, "Our *Zongduozhu* does not worship Bodhisattva, I have never seen him reading any scripture."

Although Tao Gong’e's martial art skill was high, but since childhood she had lived in the Palace, toward the ways of the world she knew very little. Although both of them were of the same Palace, day in and day out Wei Xiaobao intermingled with the Emperor, Empress Dowager, princes and dukes, high-ranking ministers, Imperial Bodyguards and court eunuchs, he was always swaying back and forth among treacherous plots, so he had enough practice to be quick-witted; practically his entire body was his weapon. Tao Gong’e, on the other hand, only worked together with a couple of old palace maids, she did not even talk more than a couple of dozen sentences in a year, and she barely saw anybody else. In term of craftiness and resourcefulness, the difference between these two people was simply too far, it was even greater than the disparity between their respective martial art skill levels.

Seeing Wei Xiaobao's innocent expression, Tao Gong’e thought, "I have just saved his life, he must be very grateful to me, how can a little child like him tell a lie? Much less I have personally searched his belongings?" She nodded and said, "I saw them opening up your bundle and searched through it. They found a lot of jewels and several hundred thousand *taels* of banknotes, and were green with envy, so they talked it over how to share the booty. Upon hearing it, I was angry, so I came in and took care of them."

"Damn it," Wei Xiaobao cursed, "The old wh0re Empress Dowager knew about my wealth and sent some Imperial Bodyguards to murder me for my money, using the knockout drug and opening a black inn. That old wh0re is doing some lowly shady business, she not a good thing."

"I don't think it was her idea," Tao Gong’e said, "What the Empress Dowager wants is Buddhist scripture, not jewels or money. Those several copies of Buddhist scripture concern a matter of great importance. I was thinking, could it be possible

that you gave those books to Xu Tianchuan and the two ladies to be brought to Shijiazhuang? Since the enemy has been eliminated, I thought I would let you rest for a while, so I rushed on horseback to the south to catch them up. I found their carriage outside an inn. I was thinking of searching quietly, but that man Eight-Armed Ape was very vigilant. As soon as I set my feet on the roof, he had already detected my presence. I can't tell him anything, so without any better option I fought him one more time."

"He is not your match," Wei Xiaobao said.

"I really did not want to offend your Tian Di Hui," Tao Gong'e said, "But I had no choice. After sealing his acupoint, I apologize to him profusely, I asked him not to be angry with me. *Xiao Xiongdi*, next time you see him, please tell him again that I am really sorry and had no choice. I went through those three people's luggage, I even searched through their carriage, but did not find anything, so I unsealed their acupoints and riding a horse, I rushed back here."

"Turns out while I was muddleheaded and did not know anything, you have done these many matters," Wei Xiaobao said, "Tao *Gugu*, how did you know I belong to Tian Di Hui?"

Tao Gong'e smiled and said, "I drove the carriage with you for half a day, how could I not hear what you were talking about? You are this young, yet have become the Green Wood Hall's *Xiangzhu*, in Tian Di Hui you are in charge of a very big responsibility, aren't you?"

Wei Xiaobao was very proud of himself. He laughed and said, "Indeed, it can't be considered small."

Tao Gong'e was lost in thought for half a day, then she asked, "You have been with the Emperor for a long time, have you ever heard him mentioning some Buddhist scripture?"

"He did," Wei Xiaobao replied, "The Emperor and Empress

Dowager seem to hold this annoying Buddhist scripture in a very high regard. Actually, damn it, what's the use? The Empress Dowager is so bad that even if she chanted 'Amitabha Buddha' ten thousand times a day, Bodhisattva won't possibly bless her ..."

Without waiting for him to finish, Tao Gong’e busily asked, "What did they say, exactly?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "The Emperor sent me and Songgotu *Daren* to Oboi's mansion to take inventory of that criminal's confiscated property, he told me repeatedly that I must find two copies of some 'four' sutra. I think there is a 'two' character and perhaps a 'ten' character."

Tao Gong’e looked very excited. "Right, right!" she said, "It must be the 'Forty-two[58]-chapter Sutra'. Did you find it?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "I am totally illiterate, how would I know if it is 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra' or 'Fifty-three-chapter Sutra'? Later on Songgotu *Daren* found it and I gave both copies to the Empress Dowager. She was very happy, she rewarded me with many candy, cakes and pastries. Damn it, the old wh0re is really stingy. Instead of giving me gold or silver, she treated me as a child and deceived me, and only gave me candy, cakes and pastries. If I knew she was that bad, I would have thrown those two copies of sutra into the kitchen stove of the Catering Department, to be used as fuel to cook ..."

"Don't burn, don't burn!" Tao Gong’e hastily said.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "I know I must not burn it; if the Emperor ask Songgotu *Daren*, my trickery would be exposed immediately."

Tao Gong’e muttered to herself, "If that's the case, the Empress Dowager has at least two copies of the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'?"

"Perhaps she has four," Wei Xiaobao said.

"She has four?" Tao Gong’e said, "How ... how do you know?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "When I was hiding under her bed the other night, I overheard she mentioned to that man who was disguised as a woman that originally she had one copy, from Oboi's residence she got two copies, and then she sent the Deputy Chief of the Imperial Bodyguards Rui Dong to get another copy from some banner commander's office."

"That's correct," Tao Gong’e said, "It was from the Bordered Blue Banner's Banner Commander's office. So she has a total of four copies in her hand; perhaps she has more ... five, or six." She stood up and paced back and forth several paces before saying, "Those sutra are extremely important. *Xiao Xiongdi*, I do hope you can help me to steal those several copies of 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra' from the Empress Dowager."

Wei Xiaobao hesitated; he said, "In the event that the old wh0re's injury is heavy, eventually she won't live. I am afraid she might bring those sutra along in her coffin."

"That is unlikely to happen," Tao Gong’e said, "I am worried that the *Jiaozhu* [Cult Leader] of the *Shen Long Jiao* [Divine Dragon Cult] would make a move by acting swiftly and get there first, then it would be really bad."

It was the first time Wei Xiaobao had ever heard about the Cult Leader of the Divine Dragon Cult. "Who is that?" he asked.

Tao Gong’e did not answer. She was pacing around the room several times. The window paper gradually turned bright, soon the sun would shine. She turned around and said, "It's not convenient to talk in here, I am afraid the walls have ears. Let us go!" She carried the three dead bodies outside the inn and dumped them onto the carriage.

She killed those three men with a jolt of her heavy hand, they did not shed any blood at all, the corpses were clean. She said,

"They tied the innkeeper and your cart driver, let them struggle free on their own." Sitting together with Wei Xiaobao on the driver seat, she drove the carriage westward.

Seven or eight *li* later, the sky had already brightened. Tao Gong’e tossed the corpses on a graveyard and piled large piece of rocks to cover them. Returning to the carriage, she said, "Riding on the carriage, we can talk while hastening on our journey, no need to fear someone is listening."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "I wonder if someone is listening under the carriage."

Tao Gong’e was startled. "Right," she said, "Your thought is more thorough than mine." Brandishing the whip, she coiled the whip, 'Shua!' and struck the bottom of the carriage. Repeatedly she struck three times before she was convinced nobody was hiding underneath the carriage. She laughed and said, "I don't know anything about guarding against the bad act of the Jianghu people."

"Then I am worse than you are," Wei Xiaobao said, "You are always a step ahead of me, otherwise you wouldn't be able to save me last night."

By this time the carriage was traveling along a main road, all around them were quiet open space. Tao Gong’e slowly said, "You have saved my life, I have also saved your life. The two of us can be considered friends in times of tribulation, in life and death. *Xiao Xiongdi*, based on our age, I can be your mother, I can look after you and won’t abandon you, just call me your *Gugu*. Are you willing to consider me as your *Gugu*, you be my nephew?”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “I won’t lose anything by being a nephew, besides, I have already called her *Gugu* anyway.” Thereupon he hurriedly said, “That’s wonderful, but I have something really bad I need to tell you. I am afraid after you

find out, you won't want me to be your nephew anymore."

"What is it?" Tao Gong'e asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "I don't have a dad, my mom is a wh0re in a pleasure house."

Tao Gong'e was startled, but instantly a happy smile appeared across her face as she said delightedly, "Good nephew, a hero is not worried over low family background. Our *Taizu Huangdi* was a monk, was a hoodlum riff-raff, yet it was irrelevant. You do not even conceal this kind of fact from me, it goes to show that you are being sincere to your *Gugu*, naturally I won't conceal anything from you either."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "My mom is a wh0re, Mao Shiba *Dage* is already aware, eventually I cannot conceal it from anybody. If you want to swindle someone else, the most hidden secret in your heart must be shaken out first." He jumped down at once and kneeled and kowtowed, saying, "Nephew Wei Xiaobao pays his respect to *Gugu*."

For decades Tao Gong'e lived deep within the Palace, she had no relatives no family members, she had even less friendship and heard less friendly talk; hearing how affectionate Wei Xiaobao called her, she could not help but was very touched. Hastily she also got down from the carriage and said, "Good nephew, from now on I have a close relative in the world …" Speaking to this point, she could not refrain from shedding some tears. She was smiling and wiping her tears at the same time, saying, "Look at me, this is a very happy occasion, yet your *Gugu* is crying."

The two of them climbed back onto the carriage. Tao Gong'e held the reins with her right hand, and held Wei Xiaobao's right hand with her left, letting the mule walked step by step slowly. She said, "Good nephew, my surname is Tao, it's my real surname, my humble given name is Hongying; I entered the

Palace when I was twelve. By my second year I was already serving the Princess."

"Princess?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"Yes, Princess," Tao Hongying replied, "Our Great Ming's His Majesty Emperor Chongzhen's own princess."

"Ah," Wei Xiaobao said, "So *Gugu* entered the Palace during our Great Ming's Emperor Chongzhen."

"Exactly," Tao Hongying replied, "When the Emperor Chongzhen left the Palace, he swung his sword to cut off the Princess' arm. When I heard that Princess had run into misfortune, I rushed out, thinking to save her. In my panic, I fell heavily and my forehead hit the stone steps and I fainted. By the time I came to, His Majesty and the Princess had already gone, the Palace was in total chaos, nobody cared about me. Not too long afterwards, that Chuang [lit. rushing] thief[59] entered the Palace, and then the Manchurian Qing Tatars drove away the Chuang thief and took possession of the Imperial Palace. Ay, that was many, many years ago."

"Wasn't the Princess the Emperor Chongzhen's own daughter?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "Why did he want to hack her to death?"

Tao Hongying sighed and said, "Princess was the Emperor Chongzhen's own daughter, she was the daughter he most doted on. By that time the Capital had already fallen, the evil troops had already entered the city, His Majesty was determined to sacrifice himself, he was afraid the Princess would be disgraced by the traitors; therefore, he wanted to kill the Princess first."

"So that's what happened," Wei Xiaobao said, "To kill one's own daughter is really not easy. I heard Emperor Chongzhen later hung himself on the Coal Hill, is that right?"

“Afterwards I heard people say so,” Tao Hongying replied, “The Manchurian Qing Tatars were led through the pass by Wu Sangui, they defeated the Chuang thief and occupied our Great Ming’s rivers and mountains. From all the eunuchs and palace maids in the Palace, eight or nine out of ten were let go, they said they were afraid those people would be unreliable. At that time I was still very young, plus my injury from the fall was quite heavy so that I was lying down in a dark room, nobody cared about me. It was more than three years later that I met my Shifu.”

“*Gugu*,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Your martial art skill is this high, your Shifu, the Senior’s martial art skill was naturally even more amazing.”

“My Shifu said that there are a lot of capable people in the world,” Tao Gong’e replied, “Our martial art skill cannot be considered anything special. My Shifu had received my Tai Shifu’s[60] order to enter the Palace and become a palace maid.” Brandishing the whip in the air, she made a ‘crack!’ noise before continuing, “The reason my Shifu entered the Palace was exactly those eight copies of the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'.”

“Altogether there are eight?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“Altogether there are eight,” Tao Hongying replied, “The Manchus have eight banners: yellow, white, red, and blue, four plain banners, and four bordered banners. Each banner’s commander has one copy, altogether there are eight copies.”

“That’s exactly right,” Wei Xiaobao said, “The two copies of sutra we got from Oboi’s house have different colored envelopes, one has yellow envelope with red border, the other has plain white envelope.”

Tao Hongying said, “Turns out the color of the eight sutra envelopes are identical to the eight banners’ color; I have never seen any copy.”

Wei Xiaobao pondered in his heart, “I have five copies in my possession, that means there are three more. In the end, what is so strange about these eight sutras? I am sure *Gugu* knows. I must find a way to sound her out.” Feigning ignorance, he said, “Turns out your Tai Shifu, the Senior, was also a devout worshipper of Bodhisattva. The Buddhist scriptures of the Palace are naturally precious; some people said that those scriptures are written using golden ink.”

“That’s not it,” Tao Hongying said, “Good nephew, what I am going to tell you today, you must never divulge it to anybody else. Please make an oath.”

To Wei Xiaobao, ‘making an oath’ was extremely trivial and ordinary; he could make an oath in the morning, and had totally forgotten about it in the afternoon, he could make an oath in the afternoon, and had totally forgotten about it by the time he went to bed. Much less out of eight copies of sutra, he had already had five, how could he easily tell the secret to other people? He hastily said, “By the Emperor of Heaven and Empress of Earth, if Wei Xiaobao leaks the secret of the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra', may he suffer the most terrible fate, may he die just like that turtle *Shixiong* of the old wh0re who dress in drag.” While in his heart he said, “I will never dress in drag and sleep with that old wh0re, so I can’t possibly die like that turtle *Shixiong* of hers.” He did believe that when he made an oath, he would have to answer to it someday; consequently, when he made an oath, he would always leave a room to maneuver.

Tao Hongying laughed. “This oath is actually very fresh and weird,” she said. “Let me tell you: When the Manchurian Qing Tatars entered the pass, they did not expect to obtain our Great Ming’s rivers and mountains. Manchu people are very few, their soldiers are not many; they would be perfectly contented if they could occupy the area outside the pass for a long time.

Therefore, when they entered the pass, whenever the eight banners' soldiers saw gold, silver and jewels, they would immediately snatch it away. They moved all these money and valuables to outside the pass. At that time the one wielding power was Emperor Shunzi's father's younger brother the Regent Prince, but each of the Manchu's Eight Banners also have some power. That time the Eight Banners' commanders got together to draw the secret location where the treasure was collected, and each commander of the Eight Banners held one piece of the map …"

Wei Xiaobao sprang up. "Ah!" he exclaimed loudly, "I know it!" Unable to contain his joy, the carriage shook. He sat back down and said, "These eight pieces of the map are hidden in those eight copies of the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'."

Tao Hongying said, "It appears that it's not entirely like that, but only those Eight Banners' commanders knew clearly. Forget that no one among us, Han people, knows; I am afraid even among Manchu princes and dukes, and high-level ministers, only a few know about it. My Shifu said that the mountain on which the Manchu hid those jewels is the location of their dragon's vein[61]. That the Tatars can occupy our Great Ming's rivers and mountains, ascend the throne and become the Emperor, it is entirely dependent upon this mountain's dragon vein."

"What is a dragon's vein?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Tao Hongying replied, "That is an extremely good place according to *feng shui*; the Manchu Tatars ancestors were buried on that mountain, their descendants prospered greatly, they came to China and became the Emperor. Shifu said that if we can find that treasured mountain and cut off the dragon's vein, plus dig out their graves, not only the Manchurian Tatars would fail to be the Emperor, everything they have would die

inside the pass. This treasured mountain is that important, and that was the reason my Tai Shifu and my Shifu spent their hearts and blood to find the location of this mountain range. This great secret is hidden inside those eight copies of 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'.”

“*Gugu*,” Wei Xiaobao asked, “How did your Tai Shifu know this Manchu people’s matter?”

“This matter is complicated and not easy to express succinctly,” Tao Hongying replied, “My Tai Shifu was originally a Han woman of Jinzhou [prefecture level city in Liaoning province], who was captured by the Tatars. That Tatar was the Bordered Blue Banner Commander. My Tai Shifu said that after the Tatars entered the pass, they saw how big our China is, how many people we have, they were both delighted and afraid. The commanders of the Eight Banners successively held several meetings for many days, there were heated arguments during the meetings, they could not settle on any single idea.”

“What were they arguing for?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

Tao Hongying said, “Some banner commanders wanted to occupy the whole China, some others said that Han people were this many, if they rose in rebellion, a hundred Han people could fight one banner man, how could the banner man live? It would be better if they loot the whole place and return to outside the pass; it would be much safer. Finally the Regent Prince made a decision; he said that while plundering and transporting the gold, silver and jewels outside the pass, they would establish an emperor in China. If the Han people rebelled and the situation became critical, the banner men would withdraw to the Shanhai Pass.”

“Turns out the Manchurian Qing Tatars at that time were really afraid of us, Han people,” Wei Xiaobao said.

“Why not?” Tao Hongying said, “Even now they are still afraid.

It’s just that we are not of one mind. Good nephew, the Tatar young emperor is very fond of you, if you can search out the location of those eight sutras, we could steal those sutras and break the Tatars’ dragon’s vein, then those gold, silver and jewels could be used to cover the expense of raising a militia [orig. ‘righteous army’ – volunteer army]. So long as we raise arms, the Qing troops would be frightened and flee outside the pass.”

Wei Xiaobao did not have any zeal to breaking the dragon’s vein or raising militia, but thinking about that mountain hid an innumerable wealth, he could not help but palpitating with eagerness. “*Gugu*,” he asked, “Is the secret of this treasured mountain really hidden inside those eight sutras?”

Tao Hongying replied, “My Tai Shifu told my Shifu that one day the Bordered Blue Banner Commander got drunk and told his young Manchurian wife that when he died, he wanted to pass on a copy of sutra to the young wife’s son, and not giving it to his first wife’s son. The young wife was really not happy, saying what’s so rare about a Buddhist scripture. The Banner Commander said that it was their Eight Banners’ lifeblood; it was more important than anything, and roughly mentioned the origin of the Buddhist scripture. Tai Shifu was eavesdropping outside the window, only then did she understand the fact. Afterwards Tai Shifu trained martial arts, my Shifu also learned from her, Senior, for many years. Tai Shifu attempted to steal the sutra, as a result, she was beaten and was seriously hurt. Before her death, she told Shifu to infiltrate the Palace and become a palace maid, to find a way to steal the scripture. There were martial art experts in the Bordered Blue Banner Commander’s mansion, she thought her effort of stealing the scripture in the Palace would likely go smoothly. Who would have known that not long after Shifu entered the Palace, she found out that the imperial ground was even more strictly guarded, palace maids cannot carelessly wander around, so

stealing the scripture became extremely difficult. When she was talking to me, she found out about the Great Ming's Princess, her heart remembered her old ruler with fondness, and thus she accepted me as her disciple."

Wei Xiaobao said, "No wonder with thousand ways, a hundred plans the old wh0re is trying to get hold of the scripture. She is a Manchurian, she can't possibly want to break the dragon's vein, presumably she wants to obtain the treasured mountain's gold, silver and jewels. But she is the Empress Dowager, she could have anything she wants, what does she needs the treasure for?" He also thought, "Then why did the old turtle Hai kept this matter constantly in his mind? Why did he always want me to go to the Upper Study Room to steal the book? Hmm, perhaps he did not really want the scripture, he only wanted to trick me into revealing who was the mastermind who sent me to poison blind his eyes, or perhaps to investigate who the real assassin who murdered Empress Duan Jing. He must be thinking that the mastermind and the assassin was the same person. I am afraid I do not have the ability to deceive the old turtle Hai into revealing his mind; perhaps even Yan Luo Wang do not have that ability."

How could Tao Hongying guess that Wei Xiaobao's thought had turned toward Hai Dafu? She said, "Perhaps there is something else, something strange in the treasured mountain, which even Tai Shifu did not know. Not long after Shifu entered the Palace, she fell ill and died. At the death's door, the Senior imploring me over and over again, telling me to find a way to steal the scripture. She warned me that stealing the scripture is extremely difficult, based on my own strength, I might not succeed, so she wanted me to take a reliable disciple inside the Palace and pass the secret of the sutra onto her. This generation failed, the next generation would try again, never to let this secret to be buried and forgotten."

"Yes, yes!" Wei Xiaobao said, "If this great secret is lost in transmission, those countless gold, silver and jewels would be … it would be a great pity."

"The gold, silver and treasure is not important," Tao Hongying said, "But to let generation after generation of the Tatars occupying our Han people's rivers and mountains would be the greatest regret."

"*Gugu* is right," Wei Xiaobao said. But in his heart he was thinking, "It would be the greatest regret indeed if those gold, silver and jewels by the thousands and tens of thousands are not taken out and being spent." He was still very young; about the massacre of Han people by Manchu soldiers, he only heard it from others, he had never personally experienced it. Among the Manchu people in the Palace at that time, only the Empress Dowager was hateful to him. Although Hai Dafu also conspired against him, in the end he did more harm to Hai Dafu than Hai Dafu did harm to him. The rest of the people, from the Emperor down, all had treated him very well, so he had never thought the Manchus were fiendish, bloody and cruel people. He was also aware however, that if he did not receive the Emperor's favor, those Manchurian nobilities and ministers could not possibly show that kind of warmth or flatter him like that. But when all is said and done, he saw more kindness and less brutality from those Manchus; therefore, the enmity between the races, the hatred of his nation, was rather dull in his heart.

"These past few years," Tao Hongying continued, "I haven't received any disciple. The number of palace maids I saw is not many, the ones I met were either stupid and muddleheaded, or flirtatious and narrow-minded, all they think about daily was how to be lucky to have the Emperor's visit so that they could rise from the palace maid to imperial concubine. How can we tell this great secret of ours to this kind of people? In recent years I often worried that if this situation continues, not only I

could not obtain the slightest clue of the scriptures' whereabouts, I could not get a good disciple either. When I die later, I would bring this secret to my grave, then the Manchu Tatars would sit steadily on our rivers and mountains. The fact that I would wrong Tai Shifu and Shifu needs not be mentioned, worse yet, I would become great sinner toward our Han people. Good nephew, I came across you inadvertently and could tell you all about this matter, in my heart I am really happy."

"I am also very happy," Wei Xiaobao said, "But not because of the sutra or whatever, I don't even think about it in my heart."

"Then what makes you happy?" Tao Hongying asked.

"I don't have any relative," Wei Xiaobao replied, "My mama is like that, I seldom see my Shifu, but now I have an aunt, a good aunt. Naturally I am very happy." His mouth was sweet, he knew how to coax Tao Hongying and made her happy.

Indeed she was very happy; she smiled and said, "And I get a good nephew, so I am also very happy." After a short pause, she asked, "Who is your Shifu?"

Wei Xiaobao replied, "My Shifu is the *Zongduozhu* of Tian Di Hui, surnamed Chen, given name Jin at the top and Nan at the bottom."

Even such a famous personality like Chen Jinnan, Tao Hongying seemed to hear it only for the first time. She simply nodded and said, "So your Shifu is Tian Di Hui's *Zongduozhu*, his martial art must be superb."

"It's just that the time I follow my Shifu is too short," Wei Xiaobao said, "I haven't learned any skill. Good *Gugu*, how about you teach me some?"

Tao Hongying hesitated before saying, "If you have never learned any martial art, naturally I would be happy to pass on everything I learned to you. But most likely your Shifu's martial art is completely different to my martial art school, I am afraid

it would be harmful if you learned it. In your opinion, your Shifu and I, whose martial art skill is stronger?”

When Wei Xiaobao asked Tao Hongying to teach him martial art, his intention was only to make her happy. Supposing that Tao Hongying really agreed to teach him, he would have tried to make other excuses instead. Once he started martial art training, he would not be able to go to Wutai Mountain, much less his natural character was that he only loved to loaf around and play, without any patience to learn martial art. Hearing her saying that, he seized the chance by saying, "*Gugu*, in front of you, I can't tell a lie."

"Naturally it is better for a little child to be honest," Tao Hongying said.

Wei Xiaobao said, "I have seen Shifu fought with someone with very good martial art, in only three moves he managed to subdue him; that man lost miserably. *Gugu*, I am afraid you are still inferior to Shifu."

Tao Hongying smiled and said, "That's right. I also believe I am inferior to him by far. When I struggled against that man disguised as a palace maid, if you did not stab him in the back, I would have been finished early on. I am sure your Shifu can't be that useless."

Wei Xiaobao said, "But that fake palace maid was really formidable; even now, when I remember him, I am still afraid."

Suddenly the muscles on Tao Hongying's face were twitching, her eyes revealed a frightened look, she stared straight ahead with blank expression on her face. "*Gugu*," Wei Xiaobao said, "Are you feeling ill?"

Tao Hongying did not reply, as if she did not hear him. Wei Xiaobao asked her again. Tao Hongying's body shivered, she said, "No ... I am not." 'Splat!' suddenly the whip in her hand fell to the ground. Wei Xiaobao leaped down the carriage to pick

it up, and then he jumped back onto the carriage; his movement was very neat and nimble. He was feeling very proud of himself, hoping that Tao Hongying would utter some words of praise. But he saw she shook her head and said, "Child, after you made a decision, you should painstakingly train before you can succeed. With your martial art level right now, to deal with the eunuchs in the Palace, it is too good; but if you want to roam the Jianghu, it is too bad, you are actually inferior to people who do not know martial art at all."

Wei Xiaobao's face blushed deep red, "Yes!" he replied. But in his heart he wondered, "Although my martial art is not that good, why am I inferior to people who do not know martial art at all?"

Tao Hongying said, "If you do not know martial art at all, people would not easily kill you. But since you know martial art, your opponent will guard against your counterattack, when they make their move, they won't easily spare you; won't it be bad instead?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "What if I meet small bandits who beat randomly with some stick?"

Tao Hongying was taken aback, momentarily she was at a loss of what to say. A moment later she said, "That's true, perhaps there are more small bandits in Jianghu than martial art experts." She looked disturbed; pointing to a large tree on the right ahead of them, she said, "Let us take a rest before continuing our journey, let the mule eat some grass." She drove toward the tree. The two of them jumped down the carriage and sat side by side on the tree root.

Tao Hongying was lost in thought again. Suddenly she mumbled, "Did he say it? Did he say something?"

Wei Xiaobao did not know whom she was asking, he raised his head to look at her, not knowing how to answer her question.

The two of them looked at each other, one was waiting the other to answer, the other did not know what she was talking about.

After a while, Tao Hongying asked again, "Did you hear him saying anything? Did you see his lips moving?"

Seeing her strange expression, Wei Xiaobao was rather scared. "*Gugu* must be under a spell. Or did she see a ghost?" he mused. "*Gugu*," he asked, "Whom did you see?"

"Who?" Tao Hongying said, "It's that ... that man who dressed as a fake palace maid!"

Wei Xiaobao was even more afraid. With a trembling voice he asked, "You saw that fake palace maid? Where ... where is he?"

As if she had just awakened from a dream Tao Hongying said, "That night in the Empress Dowager's room, when I fought that fake palace maid, did you hear him or see he opened his mouth to speak?"

Wei Xiaobao let out a breath; he said, "Um, so you are asking about that night. Did he say anything? I did not hear it."

Tao Hongying pondered for a moment, and then she shook her head and said, "My martial art skill is far too inferior to his, he did not need to use any incantations."

Wei Xiaobao was completely at a loss. "*Gugu*," he said consolingly, "No need to think about him anymore, we have killed him early on, he won't come back to life."

"We have killed that man, he won't come back to life," Tao Hongying echoed. She seemed to be consoling herself, but when she said those words, her expression showed that deep in her heart she was extremely terrified.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Although your martial art is good, you are afraid of ghosts. Just killing one person you are this anxious, much less it was me who killed that fake palace maid,

it wasn't you. You killed the old wh0re, actually you killed a tactless and impulsive person; you killed her half dead, half alive, in the end she still came back to live. How disappointing!"

Tao Hongying said, "Since he is dead, naturally we can forget about him, right?"

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Even if he turned into a ghost, we don't need to fear him."

"What ghost?" Tao Hongying asked, "I am worried because he was the disciple of Divine Dragon Cult's *Jiaozhu*. That ... that ... um, Empress Dowager called him *Shixiong*, it's impossible, it's definitely impossible. Looking at his martial art, it was totally different that hers, right? You really did not see him moving his lips when he was fighting, right?" She seemed to be talking to herself, her voice trembled, as if she was hoping Wei Xiaobao would confirm her speculation.

But how could Wei Xiaobao distinguish the fake palace maid's martial art? He said loudly, "Don't worry, you are right, that fake palace maid's martial art was different. When he was fighting, his lips were shut tight, he did not utter a single word. *Gugu*, what kind of fellow is that Divine Dragon Cult's *Jiaozhu*?"

Tao Hongying hurriedly said, "Hong *Jiaozhu* of *Shen Long Jiao*'s [if you don't mind too much, I'd like to use Shen Long Jiao from now on, in my mind 'Divine Dragon Cult' is just too clumsy] magical power is extensive, his martial art is deep and immeasurable, how can you casually call him a 'fellow'? Child, even behind his back, your speech must not offend him. *Da Jiaozhu* [Great Cult Leader] Hong's disciples and grand disciples are numerous and very well-informed, as soon as you utter a sentence or half a phrase disrespectful word toward him, it will be transmitted to his ear, you ... just consider your life is over." While saying that, she looked left and right, as if she was afraid a Shen Long Jiao *Jiaozhu*'s follower was around.

"Shen Long Jiao *Jiaozhu* is that powerful?" Wei Xiaobao said, "Could it be that his power exceeds that of the Emperor?"

"Naturally his power is not as great as the Emperor's," Tao Hongying replied, "But if you offend the Emperor, you can run and hide, the Emperor may not necessarily able to find and seize you; but if you offend Shen Long Jiao *Jiaozhu*, even if you run to the ends of the earth, you won't find a hiding place."

"If that's the case," Wei Xiaobao said, "Shen Long Jiao has more men and greater force than our Tian Di Hui?"

Tao Hongying shook her head, "It's not the same, it's not the same," she said, "Your Tian Di Hui is fighting the Qing, restoring the Ming; your deeds are just and honorable, all hero and warriors in Jianghu respect you deeply. Shen Long Jiao on the other hand, is substantially different."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Are you saying that all hero and warriors in Jianghu are afraid of Shen Long Jiao?"

Tao Hongying had to think for a moment before responding, "What I understand about the Jianghu matters is very, very little; I only heard Shifu mentioning it a little bit. My Tai Shifu had such a superb martial art skill, yet she still perished under the hands of Shen Long Jiao disciple."

Wei Xiaobao swore without any restrain, "Damn it, if that's the case, Shen Long Jiao is our sworn enemy, why should we fear him?"

Tao Hongying shook her head, then slowly said, "My Shifu said that the martial art taught by Shen Long Jiao has countless changes, admittedly, it is very formidable; but even more difficult to resist is the many incantation practiced by their Cult, which they read as they are facing the enemy, which can make the opponent's heart alarmed and trembling with fear, while the more they fight, the braver they become. When Tai Shifu was trying to steal the sutra from the Bordered Blue Banner

Commander's mansion, she was involved in a fierce battle against several disciples of the Shen Long Jiao. One of them started to read the spell, Tai Shifu's fist wind and palm strength became weaker and weaker, until finally her lower abdomen was hit by a palm and she suffered a heavy injury. At that time my Shifu was watching from the side, she said that she mustered up her courage to rush forward to help, but after hearing the incantation, her whole body turned limp and painful, and she had a strong desire to kneel down and surrender, unexpectedly her fighting spirit was gone. When Tai Shifu was wounded, that person no longer read the spell, my Shifu immediately felt her courage surged back, she rushed toward Tai Shifu and took her away. When she recalled this event afterward, she always felt ashamed but was also scared, thus she repeatedly warned me that among the most dangerous things in the world, nothing surpasses fighting with Shen Long Jiao's people."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Your Shifu was a woman, her courage was small, seeing the strength of the opponent, she was frightened and thinking about surrendering." He asked, "*Gugu*, did you hear what kind of spell that man was reading?"

"I ... I did not hear it," Tao Hongying replied, "I was afraid that fake palace maid was a Shen Long Jiao disciple, that's why I asked you if you hear him saying anything or see his lips moving during the fight."

"Oh, so that's the reason," Wei Xiaobao said. He tried to think if he saw or heard anything from under the bed. "No, I did not. But did you hear it?"

Tao Hongying said, "That fake palace maid's martial art was a lot stronger than mine, I fought him with everything I have, I neither hear nor see anything that happened around me. I just felt that after I fought him for a while, my heart suddenly became afraid, I wanted to run away. When I think about it, I

feel very strange."

"*Gugu*," Wei Xiaobao asked, "After you learned martial art, how many people have you fought? How many people have you killed?"

Tao Hongying shook her head and said, "I have never fought anybody, I have never killed even one person."

"That's the reason," Wei Xiaobao said, "After killing several more people, you won't feel afraid when you fight again."

"Perhaps you are right," Tao Hongying said, "But I don't want to fight anybody, I don't want to kill anybody even more, as long as I can safely and peacefully get those eight copies of the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra' and break the Manchurian Qing Tatars' dragon vein, I will be perfectly satisfied. Ay, but there is a 80, 90% chance that the Bordered Blue Banner Commander's copy of 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra' has fallen into Shen Long Jiao's hands. It would be very difficult to recapture the book from the Shen Long Jiao's hands." She was still wearing disguise on her face, Wei Xiaobao could not see her expression, but from her eyes, he could see clearly that deep in her heart she was still very much afraid.

"*Gugu*," Wei Xiaobao said, "What do you say about joining our Tian Di Hui?" He was thinking, "You are very scared! Our Tian Di Hui has many men and great force, we don't have to be afraid of Shen Long Jiao."

Tao Hongying was startled; she asked, "Why do you want me to join Tian Di Hui?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Tian Di Hui's main objective is to fight the Qing and restore the Ming, the same idea your Tai Shifu and your Shifu had."

"That is actually a very good idea," Tao Hongying said, "But let's talk about it later. I must return to the Palace now. Where are you going?"

"You are returning to the Palace?" Wei Xiaobao asked in amazement, "Aren't you afraid of the Empress Dowager?"

Tao Hongying sighed and said, "Since I was a child I grew up in the Palace. After thinking it over, only in the Palace I can live without fear, I don't understand anything about the matter of the outside world. Originally I was afraid this great secret would follow me to my grave, but now that I have told it to you, even if the Empress Dowager kills me, it's nothing. Besides, the Palace is very big, I will find a place where I can hide, where the Empress Dowager won't find me."

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "You return to the Palace, someday I will definitely come to see you. Right now Shifu has something for me to do."

Tao Hongying knew it was inappropriate to ask about Tian Di Hui's business, so she said, "When you are back to the Palace later, how are you and I going to meet?"

Wei Xiaobao replied, "When I am back at the Palace, I will pile up rocks at the burning ground, and will stick a piece of wood on the pile of rocks, with a picture of a bird on the piece of wood, then you'll know that I am back. That same night, we can meet at the burning ground."

Tao Hongying nodded, "Very good," she said, "Let's do it this way. Good child, the wind and waves in Jianghu are dangerous, in everything you must be careful."

Wei Xiaobao nodded, "Yes," he said, "*Gugu*, you must be careful yourself, the Empress Dowager, that old wh0re's heart is vicious, you must never, ever fall into her plot."

The two of them arrived at a town, Wei Xiaobao hired another carriage, they parted ways to the east and to the west. Wei Xiaobao saw Tao Hongying drove her carriage eastwards, he was unable not to turn his head to look at her back as he thought, "Although she is not my real *Gugu*, she treats me very

well."

Chapter 16
Sweet talk hidden in musk deer powder's fragrance, new ghosts wailed in the midst of ornaments
(Translated by Foxs)

Amidst the noise of the heavy rain, from the east wing suddenly came the sound of several women wailing, the voice was very mournful. Hearing this, everybody could not stop the hair on ther bodies from standing up, their countenance changed greatly. A moment later, from the west wing came the sound of a woman weeping in grief.

On the carriage, Wei Xiaobao closed his eyes and took a nap. Towards the evening, he suddenly heard the sound of horse's hoof, a rider was coming fast from behind. When it came close enough, he heard a man's voice shouted, "Driver, does your passenger happen to be a child?"

Wei Xiaobao recognized the voice as Liu Yizhou's; without waiting for the driver to reply, he poked his head out of the carriage and said with a laugh, "Liu *Dage*, are you looking for me?"

Liu Yizhou's brow was beaded with sweat, his face was dusty; as soon as he saw Wei Xiaobao he called out, "Good, finally I found you!" From behind the carriage he galloped around to the front and shouted, "Roll out!"

Seeing his ill-expression, Wei Xiaobao was shocked; "Liu *Dage*," he asked, "How did I offend you? Why are you so angry?"

Liu Yizhou brandished the horsewhip in his hand and lashed it out forcefully on the head of the mule pulling the carriage. The mule neighed in pain and reared on its hind legs, bringing the carriage up that the driver almost fell down. The driver shouted, "The sky is clear, the sun is shining, are you seeing a ghost? Why are you acting so unreasonably?"

Liu Yizhou shouted, "*Laozi* wants to act unreasonably!" Brandishing the whip one more time, he wound it around the driver's whip and pulled it hard, throwing the driver to the ground, and immediately lashed the whip again and again, cursing with every strike, "*Laozi* wants to act unreasonably! *Laozi* wants to act unreasonably!"

The carriage driver struggled, but was unable to crawl back up, he could only curse 'yeye', 'naynay' [(paternal) grandfather and grandmother, respectively] left and right. Liu Yizhou struck heavier and heavier; blood started to splash as the whip went

down relentlessly. Wei Xiaobao was greatly taken aback; he mused, “This carriage driver had neither grudge nor enmity with him, yet he beats him this bad, while he is actually rushing to get to me. *Laozi* is not his match, after he is done with the carriage driver, he will most likely beat me like that; the turn of events would be far from good.” Drawing the dagger from his boot, he lightly poked the mule’s buttocks.

The mule felt pain and was startled, it kicked back and then dashed wildly, pulling the large carriage along the main road. Liu Yizhou left the carriage driver, he slapped his horse’s back to give a chase, while calling out, “Good kid, if you have guts, don’t run!”

From the carriage Wei Xiaobao stuck out his head and called back, “Good kid, if you have guts, don’t pursue!”

Liu Yizhou whipped his horse to rush over. Although the mule was running very fast, it was, after all, pulling a large carriage; after running for a while, Liu Yizhou managed to close the distance. Wei Xiaobao was thinking of throwing the dagger toward Liu Yizhou, but he thought that he would most likely miss, and would lose the dagger with which he protect himself instead. He yelled and shouted wildly, urging the mule to run faster. Suddenly there was a sharp wind by his ear, followed by a burning pain on the right side of his face as Liu Yizhou’s whip struck him. Hastily he pulled his head back into the carriage, from the slit on the carriage cover he could see the head of Liu Yizhou’s horse was already by the carriage’s side, only a few more steps, Liu Yizhou would then be able to jump into the carriage. With an inspiration in a moment of desperation, he put his hand into his pocket and got an ingot of silver, which he hurled out as hard as he could, it happened to hit the horse’s left eye. Blood spurting out of the horse’s left eye as its eyeball disintegrated and blinded instantly. The horse bolted toward the hillside. Liu Yizhou hastily pulled the reins, but the horse was

hurt so bad that with a few fierce jumps it threw Liu Yizhou off its back. He rolled on the ground and immediately stood up, but the horse had already entered the forest, neighing repeatedly while galloping away.

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and called out, "Liu *Dage*, if you can't ride a horse, I advise you to catch a turtle and ride it!"

Liu Yizhou was very angry, he raised his *chi* and ran after the carriage. Wei Xiaobao jumped in fright and quickly urged the mule to run faster. When he turned his head around, he saw that although Liu Yizhou was about twenty, thirty *zhang* away from the carriage; he did not stop pursuing in large strides, it would not be easy to throw him off. Wei Xiaobao pulled his dagger and lightly poked the mule's buttocks again. Who would have thought that this time it was not working? The mule jumped up and down several times, suddenly it turned around and ran toward Liu Yizhou.

"Wrong way! Wrong way!" Wei Xiaobao yelled, "You dirty beast, I feed you but you help my enemy[62]. Now you're really putting *laozi* in a bad spot!" With all his strength he tried to pull the reins, but the mule was showing its true nature, how could he pull it back? Seeing the situation was far from good, Wei Xiaobao hastily jumped down from the carriage and ran into a forest by the side of the road.

With a big leap Liu Yizhou flew on top of him, while stretching out his left hand to grab the back of Wei Xiaobao's neck. Wei Xiaobao stabbed the dagger in his right hand backward, Liu Yizhou used his right hand to press Wei Xiaobao's arm downward, using the move 'Floating Cloud Running Water' he grabbed Wei Xiaobao's wrist and bent it backward toward his own arm so that the tip of the dagger was pointing toward Wei Xiaobao's throat.

"Little thief!" he shouted, "You still dare to resist me?" 'Slap!

Slap!' with his left hand he slapped Wei Xiaobao's ears.

Wei Xiaobao's wrist was in so much pain; he felt a cool breeze on his throat and knew that his dagger could cut iron like mud, it would shear his throat like cutting a tofu. "Liu *Dage*," he said, smiling and giggling, "If you want to say something, just say it; we are on the same side, why play rough?"

Liu Yizhou spat on his face. "Pei! Who's on the same side with you? You ... you ... you, little thief, you dare to sweet talk and deceive my Fang *Shimei* in the Imperial Palace, and ... and slept with her on the same bed. This ... this ... I ... I ... I must kill you ..." The blue veins on his forehead were bulging, his eyes looked like they were about to spout fire, his left hand curled into a fist, which he held in front of Wei Xiaobao's face.

It was only then did Wei Xiaobao realize why Liu Yizhou was that angry, turned out it was because of Fang Yi; but how did he find out? Right now he was facing a 'thousand pounds hanging by a thread' situation, if he let his anger flared up and he increased the strength of his hand by 5%, a hole would immediately appear on his own throat. Thereupon he said with laugh, "Miss Fang is your sweetheart, how could I dare to be rude to her? In Miss Fang's heart there is only one man, you. From dawn to dusk, she is only thinking about you."

Liu Yizhou's anger immediately abated. "How do you know?" he asked. The dagger was pulled back several *cun.*

Wei Xiaobao said, "It was only because she asked me to save you that I took you out of the Palace. As soon as she learned that you were out of danger, her joy was indescribable."

Suddenly Liu Yizhou's anger flared up again; with a clenched teeth he said, "You, little son-of-a-b1tch, *laozi* does not want to receive your pity! I don't care if you saved me or not, but why did you deceive my Fang *Shimei* into agreeing to marry ... to become your wife?" The dagger advanced several *cun*.

“Uh,” Wei Xiaobao said, “How can there be such thing? Who told you that? Miss Fang is a ‘bashful flower obstructing the moon’ type of beautiful woman, only a handsome and established hero like you is fit to marry her!"

Liu Yizhou's anger diminished thirty more percent, the dagger withdrew several *cun* back; he said, "You still want to deny? Fang *Shimei* has agreed to marry you and be your wife, right?" Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud. "What's so funny?" Liu Yizhou asked.

"Liu *Dage*," Wei Xiaobao said with a laugh, "Let me ask you: can a eunuch take a wife?"

Because of his anger, Liu Yizhou had rushed to pursue Wei Xiaobao, without remembering that Wei Xiaobao was a eunuch, and that eunuchs do not marry. Reminded by Wei Xiaobao's words, his heart was in full bloom, he could not help but burst out in laughter, but he did not release Wei Xiaobao's wrist. "Then why did you swindle my Fang *Shimei* into agreeing to marry you?" he asked.

"Where did you hear that from?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"I heard it with my own ears, Fang *Shimei* was talking to Xiao Junzhu," Liu Yizhou said, "Are you saying they are lying?"

"Were they talking to each other, or did they tell you?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Liu Yizhou hesitated before replying, "They were talking to each other."

What happened was that as Xu Tianchuan, Fang Yi and Mu Jianping set off toward Shijiazhuang, they had not travelled far when they came across Wu Lishen, Ao Biao and Liu Yizhou, three people. In the Qing Palace, Wu Lishen, three people were tortured; although their muscles and bones were not seriously injured, their bodies were beaten that their skin was broken

and their flesh burst open. They were also on their way to Shijiazhuang, riding on a carriage, to recuperate from their wounds. Meeting each other by chance, they were very delighted. But Fang Yi's expression when she met Liu Yizhou was entirely different from in the past, other than greeted him with a "Liu *Shige*" when they met, she was totally indifferent, she did not even pay him any attention.

Twice, then three times, Liu Yizhou tried to pull her aside so that they could have a heart-to-heart talk, but Fang Yi was unwilling to leave Mu Jianping's side. Liu Yizhou was both anxious and angry, he pressed on tighter. Fang Yi said, "Liu *Shige*, from now on the two of us only share the *Shixiong, Shimei* sentiment, apart from this, don't mention anything, don't think anything."

Liu Yizhou was startled. "Wh ... why?" he asked.

"Nothing," Fang Yi coldly replied.

Liu Yizhou pulled her hand and anxiously said, "*Shimei*, you ..."

Fang Yi struggled hard to free herself and shouted, "Please show some respect!"

Suffering a major embarrassment, at the inn that night Liu Yizhou was tossing and turning without able to put his head down to rest. His mood surged, he crawled out quietly toward the window of Fang Yi and Mu Jianping's room. As expected, he heard the two of them were talking to each other in low voice.

Mu Jianping said, "You treated Liu *Shige* like that, wouldn't you make him broken-hearted?"

"What can I do?" Fang Yi replied, "The sooner he is broken-hearted, the sooner he will forget me, the sooner he won't be broken-hearted anymore."

Mu Jianping said, "Are you really going to marry ... marry that

little child Wei Xiaobao? He is so young, can you be his wife?"

Fang Yi said, "It is you who want to marry this little monkey, therefore, you urge me to treat *Shige* well, am I right?"

"No, no, it's not that!" Mu Jianping hurriedly said, "In that case, you'd better marry Wei *Dage* sooner."

Fang Yi sighed and said, "I have made an oath, putting curse on myself; have you already forgotten? That day I said, 'By the Emperor of Heaven above and the Queen of Earth below, if Gui Gong-gong can rescue Liu Yizhou and bring him to safety, the lowly woman Fang Yi will be willing to be Gui Gong-gong's wife, and will be loyal and dependable to my husband with singleness of heart for the rest of my life, even if Gui Gong-gong cannot take me as wife for real, I am dead set on taking care of him for a lifetime. If I am double-minded, let me be cut into ten thousand pieces and will not be reincarnated.' I also said, 'Xiao Junzhu is my witness.' I can't forget this, you must not forget it either."

"You did say those words," Mu Jianping said, "But I thought ... I thought that he was only joking, you don't need to take him seriously."

Fang Yi said, "I don't care if he was serious or was only joking, but as women, if we have personally agree to give ourselves to him in marriage, we must never go back on our promise, we must be faithful unto death[63]. Much less ... much less ..."

"Much less what?" Mu Jianping asked.

Fang Yi said, "I have thought carefully, even if I can deny the words I said, but he ... he had shared the same bed with the two of us, slept under the same quilt ..."

"Pfft!" Mu Jianping stifled her laughter, "Wei *Dage* is really naughty. He also said that in the 'Legend of Heroic Deeds' there is a chapter called something like 'Mu *Wangye* subdued Yunnan

with three arrows, Gui Gong-gong embraces beautiful women with his pair of hands'. *Shijie*, he did embrace you and kiss you!" Fang Yi heaved a sigh and no longer said anything.

Listening from outside the window, Liu Yizhou felt as if his five internal organs were burning, as if the sky was spinning and the earth was turning, his knees went weak. He heard Fang Yi continued, "Actually, although he is young, he can talk smooth, and his treatment to the two of us is not bad at all. This time we part, I wonder when we will see him again."

Mu Jianping stifled another laugh, with a low voice she said, "*Shijie*, you miss him!"

"If I miss him then I miss him, so what?" Fang Yi said.

"That's right," Mu Jianping said, "I miss him too. Several times I tried to invite him to come with us to Shijiazhuang, but he always said that he has an important business to attend. *Shijie*, do you think he was telling the truth, or was he lying to us?"

Fang Yi said, "When we stopped by for a snack earlier, I overheard him chatting with the carriage driver, he was asking the way to Shanxi. Apparently he is going to Shanxi."

Mu Jianping said, "He is so young, yet traveling alone to Shanxi; what would happen if he came across bad people along the way?"

Fang Yi sighed and said, "I was thinking of asking Xu *Laoyezi* not to escort us, but to escort him instead, but I know Xu *Laoyezi* would not agree."

"*Shijie*," Mu Jianping said, "I ... I think ..."

"What is it?" Fang Yi asked.

Mu Jianping sighed. "Never mind," she said.

Fang Yi said, "Too bad both of us are injured, otherwise, we can accompany him going to Shanxi. Now that we met Wu

Shishu, Liu *Shige*, we cannot go looking for him."

Listening to this part, Liu Yizhou's head was dizzy. 'Bang!' his forehead bumped onto the window frame. "What's that?" Fang Yi and Mu Jianping asked together.

Liu Yizhou's heart was burning with jealousy, it was as if he turned mad; his only thought was, "I must kill that boy, I must kill that boy!" Rushing toward the front courtyard, he pulled a horse, pushed open the inn's gate, mounted the horse and rushed off. He thought that since Wei Xiaobao was going to Shanxi, he headed to the west.

Galloping until daybreak, he asked the way to Shanxi, then rushed along the main road in pursuit. Each time he came across a large carriage, he would ask, “Does the one sitting on the carriage happen to be a child?”

Listening to Liu Yizhou, Wei Xiaobao knew that Liu Yizhou's knowledge came from listening to Xiao Junzhu and Fang Yi's conversation, presumably he was eavesdropping; therefore, what he knew must be limited. Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Liu *Shige*, you have fallen into your *Shimei*'s trick."

"What trick?" Liu Yizhou asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Miss Fang told me that she wanted to make you mad, because she put her heart and soul to save you, but you did not have her in your heart at all."

"How ... how can that be?" Liu Yizhou asked anxiously, "How could she say that I do not have her in my heart at all?"

"You gave her a silver hairpin, didn't you?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "There was a plum blossom on the head of the hairpin."

"Yes, yes!" Liu Yizhou replied, "How do you know?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "During the tangled battle in the Palace, she dropped the hairpin, and she seemed very anxious about it. She said that it was given by her sweetheart, so whatever

happens she must not lose it, even if she has to stake her life, she must find it."

Liu Yizhou was taken aback. "She ... she is that good to me?" he muttered to himself.

"Of course," Wei Xiaobao said, "How can it be false?"

"And then what happened?" Liu Yizhou asked.

"You twist my hand like this, I am in great pain," Wei Xiaobao said, "How can I talk?"

"Alright!" Liu Yizhou said. Hearing Fang Yi's deep affection toward him, his rage had dissipated for the most part; also, he thought that this child could not escape from his palm anyway, thereupon he released his grip and asked, "And then what happened?"

Being grasped by him, Wei Xiaobao's arm went numb and was hurting bad; he slowly put the dagger back into his boot, and saw that there were some red and swollen finger prints on his wrist. "Mu Palace people love to grab other people's wrist. You are like this, Bai Hanfeng was also like this. The 'Turtle Grasping Technique' of the Mu Family Fist Technique is very well-developed."

When saying the 'Turtle Grabbing Technique', the word 'turtle' was spoken very obscurely that Liu Yizhou did not hear it clearly, but he did not take any notice anyway; Liu Yizhou asked, "Fang *Shimei* lost the silver hairpin I gave her, and then what happened?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "You have gripped me with your 'Turtle Claw' that I am unable to breathe easily, I must take a rest before I can tell you anything. In short, whether you can or cannot take Miss Fang as your wife, it involves a great responsibility."

This time Liu Yizhou could hear the words 'Turtle Claw' clearly,

but his rage stemmed from the fact that Wei Xiaobao has swindled Fang Yi into agreeing to marry him; he really did not care if Wei Xiaobao took advantage of him orally. Also, hearing Wei Xiaobao said, 'Whether you can or cannot take Miss Fang as your wife, it involves a great responsibility', he was quite concerned; therefore, he said urgently, "Tell me quickly, don't dawdle."

Wei Xiaobao said, "I must sit down first and slowly rest before I'll have the energy to talk." Liu Yizhou was helpless; he had no choice but to follow Wei Xiaobao to a big tree by the forest. Seeing Wei Xiaobao sat on the tree roots, he also sat down by his side.

Wei Xiaobao sighed. "What a pity, what a pity," he said.

Liu Yizhou immediately felt uneasy, "What do you mean 'what a pity'?" he anxiously asked.

"What a pity your *Shimei* is not here," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Otherwise, if she could sit side by side with you like this, discussing passion and talking of love with you, she would be very happy."

Liu Yizhou was greatly delighted, he could not refrain from laughing as he asked, "How do you know?"

"I heard her personally saying it," Wei Xiaobao said, "That day when she dropped the silver hairpin, she staked her life and braved enormous danger to rush through three palace gates heavily guarded by the Imperial Bodyguards. Although heavily injured, she managed to kill three Qing Palace's Imperial Bodyguards, until she was finally able to retrieve that silver hairpin back. I said, 'Miss Fang, you were very stupid, it's just a silver hairpin, how many *qian* does it worth? I'll give you a thousand *taels* of silver; in one breath we can easily find three, four thousand silver hairpins just like it. Even if you wear ten pins every day, different pins each day, in one year, three

hundred and sixty days, you will wear new hairpins daily.' Miss Fang said, 'You are just a kid, what do you know? This is a gift from my dear one, Liu *Shige*. Even if you give me a thousand pins, ten thousand pins, gold hairpins or pearl hairpins, how can it beat this silver hairpin, or a copper hairpin, or an iron hairpin, which my dear one Liu *Shige* gave me?' Liu *Dage*, tell me, don't you agree that Miss Fang is muddleheaded?"

Listening to this, Liu Yizhou was beaming from ear to ear that he could not close his mouth. "Then … then why did she say different things when she was talking to Xiao Junzhu in the middle of the night?" he asked.

"You were eavesdropping outside their window in the middle of the night, weren't you?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Liu Yizhou blushed slightly, he said, "I wasn't eavesdropping, I wanted to go pee in the middle of the night, and happened to hear them."

"Liu *Dage*," Wei Xiaobao said, "You are at fault here. Why didn't you pee anywhere else, but peed outside Miss Fang's window? Won't it stink to high heaven and the stench overwhelm the two 'bashful flower obstructing the moon' ladies?"

"Yes, yes!" Liu Yizhou said, "And then what did my Fang *Shimei* say?"

"My tummy is very hungry," Wei Xiaobao said, "I don't have the energy to talk. Quickly go and buy something for me to eat. Only after I am full that I will tell you those corny, sickening words your Fang *Shimei* said." He was hoping to swindle Liu Yizhou into agreeing to take him into a small town, so that he could slip away in the crowd.

"What corny, sickening words?" Liu Yizhou asked, "Fang *Shimei* has always been very proper, she has never said any corny, sickening words."

“Fine, she is very proper, she has never said any corny, sickening words,” Wei Xiaobao said, “She said ‘my dear one Liu Shige’! She also said, ‘my considerate and handsome Liu Shige’. Damn it, you may not find it corny and sickening, but I was embarrassed just listening to it. Humph, she was not ashamed to speak those kinds of words.”

Liu Yizhou’s heart was in full bloom, but he said, “It’s impossible, how can Fang *Shimei* speak those kinds of words?”

“Fine, fine!” Wei Xiaobao said, “Just consider me speaking incorrectly. Liu *Dage*, I want to find something to eat, excuse me, I must leave.” While speaking, he stood up.

Listening to his story, Liu Yizhou’s heart was unbearably itchy; how could he let Wei Xiaobao leave? Hastily he gently pushed down Wei Xiaobao’s shoulder and said, “Wei *Xiongdi*, don’t leave too quickly! I have brought some flat cake with me as my dry rations. Why don’t you eat it first? After you are done talking, when we get to the town ahead, I will invite you to drink wine and eat some noodles to apologize to you.” While saying that, he opened the bundle he carried on his back and took several flat cakes.

Wei Xiaobao took a cake; he tore a piece and chewed it several times before saying, “This flat cake is neither salty nor sour, what kind of goodies is this? Here, try this for me.” And he handed the torn piece of flat cake back to Liu Yizhou.

Liu Yizhou said, “This cake has hardened, naturally the flavor is not too good. We’ll just have to deal with it to allay our hunger, we’ll talk about it later.” While saying that, he tore a piece and ate it.

Wei Xiaobao said, “I wonder how these cakes would taste?” He rummaged through the flat cakes to select one. After flipping around several times, he said, "Damn it, I want to go pee; I will eat later." He went to a big tree nearby, turned his

body around, pulled his pants and peed. Liu Yizhou fixed his gaze on him, he was afraid Wei Xiaobao would suddenly run away. After urinating, Wei Xiaobao returned to Liu Yizhou's side, flipped around the flat cakes again, before finally he picked one, tore a piece, and ate it.

After pursuing Wei Xiaobao for half a day, Liu Yizhou was very hungry. He also took a piece of flat cake and ate it. While chewing, he said, "Could it be that Fang *Shimei* and Xiao Junzhu said those things to deliberately annoy me?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "I am not the roundworm inside your Fang *Shimei*'s belly, how would I know her real intention? You are her dearly beloved *Shige*, how come you do not know and ask me instead?"

"Alright! Alright!" Liu Yizhou said, "I was hot-headed just now and have offended you. Just tell me, don't keep me in suspense!"

"Since that's the case, I will tell you the truth," Wei Xiaobao said, "Your Fang *Shimei* is very good-looking. If I were not an eunuch, I would love to take her as my wife. It's just that even if I did not take her as my wife, I am afraid it's not for you to marry her either."

"Why? Why?" Liu Yizhou anxiously asked.

"Don't be impatient," Wei Xiaobao said, "Eat some more flat cake, I will slowly tell you."

"Damn it," Liu Yizhou cursed, "You are always humming and hawing, keeping me in suspense ..." Speaking to this point, suddenly his body swayed.

"What is it?" Wei Xiaobao said, "You don't feel well? I am afraid this flat cake is not too clean."

"What?" Liu Yizhou asked. He stood up, staggered a circle, and suddenly fell down to the ground.

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud; he kicked Liu Yizhou's buttocks once and said, "Hey! It's your own flat cake, how come there is knockout drug inside? It's very strange." Liu Yizhou made an "Oh" noise, and then lost his consciousness.

Wei Xiaobao kicked him a couple more times; seeing he was completely motionless, Wei Xiaobao pulled Liu Yizhou's belt and tied his legs firmly, and then he also tied Liu Yizhou's hands behind his back. Seeing a large boulder by the big tree, he huffed and puffed to push the boulder away, revealing a hole underneath, with a pile of loose rocks inside. Moving the loose rocks out one by one, he made a hole in the ground about four *chi* deep. "*Laozi* will bury you alive today," he said with a laugh.

Dragging Liu Yizhou to the hole, he stood him up vertically, and then he pushed the dirt and rocks back into the hole. After working steadfastly, he managed to bury Liu Yizhou up to his arm with the dirt, so that only his shoulder and head were exposed. Wei Xiaobao was very proud of himself. He went to a nearby creek, took off his long gown and soaked it in the water, then returning to Liu Yizhou, he wrung the long gown and let the creek water drenched Liu Yizhou's head.

Aroused by the cold water, Liu Yizhou slowly regained his consciousness. Temporarily he was still at a loss; he wanted to struggle, but he could not move at all. He saw Wei Xiaobao was sitting in front of him, hugging his knees and chuckling while looking at him. A moment later he finally came to his senses and realized what had happened. He struggled again, but still was not able to move the least bit. He said, "Good *Xiongdi*, don't play a joke on me!"

Wei Xiaobao cursed, "F*ck your mother, *Laozi* has many important things to do, why would I want to play a joke with a stinky thief like you?" Heavily he kicked again, Liu Yizhou's right cheek was immediately drenched with blood. Wei Xiaobao cursed again, "Miss Fang is my wife, you are not fit to even

think of her. Stinky thief, you twisted *Laozi*'s hand and hurt me real bad, you slapped my face, and used whip to strike me. *Laozi* will cut your ears first, and then shear your nose; I will deal with you slice by slice." While saying that, he drew out his dagger, stooped down and run the tip of the blade on Liu Yizhou's face, twice.

Liu Yizhou was scared out of his wits; he called out, "Good *Xiong* ... Wei ... Wei *Xiongdi*, Wei *Xiangzhu*, please consider your good relation with the Mu Palace, please raise ... please raise your hand."

Wei Xiaobao said, "From the Palace I saved you and took you out, but you actually repay my kindness with enmity, unexpectedly you wanted to kill me. Humph, humph, based on your meager ability, you want to move the dust from Taisui's[64] head? You told me to consider my good relation with the Mu Palace; when you grasped my hand just now, how come you did not consider your good relation with Tian Di Hui?"

Liu Yizhou said, "Indeed I was mistaken, *Zaixia* was wrong! Please ... please ... please forgive me."

Wei Xiaobao said, "I want to cut three hundred and sixty your mother's cuts on your head, to vent off the hatred in my heart!" Lifting up Liu Yizhou's braid, he cut it with his blade. The dagger was extremely sharp, with a 'swish!' the braid fell down, and then he ran the blade back and forth on Liu Yizhou's head. In a short period of time, all the hair on Liu Yizhou's head fell off that he turned into a bald man.

"Dead bald thief," Wei Xiaobao cursed, "As soon as I see a monk, *laozi* is angry, I must kill you!"

Liu Yizhou forced a smile as he said, "Wei *Xiangzhu*, *Zaixia* is not a monk."

"So you are not a damn monk," Wei Xiaobao cursed, "Then

why did you shave your head clean? Want to deceive *Laoye*?" [lord or master, referring to self]

Liu Yizhou said in his heart, "Clearly it was you who shaved my head? Why do you blame me?" But since his life was in Wei Xiaobao's hands, he did not dare to argue; he had no choice but to say with a laugh, "A thousand mistakes, ten thousand mistakes, it's *Xiaoren* in the wrong. Wei *Xiangzhu Daren* is magnanimous, please do not hold it against me."

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "Let me ask you then: Fang Yi, Miss Fang, whose wife is she?"

"This ... this ..." Liu Yizhou stammered.

"What this or that?" Wei Xiaobao shouted loudly, "Answer it, now!" Raising his dagger, he waved it in front of Liu Yizhou's face.

Liu Yizhou thought that a real man should not suffer disadvantage from the outset; this little demon was an eunuch anyway, just let him had small verbal advantages. Otherwise, he might brandish his dagger and then Liu Yizhou would lose a nose or an ear, then it would be bad indeed. Thereupon he busily said, "She ... naturally she is Wei *Xiangzhu*'s ... she is Wei *Xiangzhu*'s wife."

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and said, "She? She who? Speak up! *Laozi* cannot understand monks' mumbling speech."

Liu Yizhou said, "Fang Yi, Fang *Shimei*, she is Wei *Xiangzhu*'s wife."

"Let me be clear on this," Wei Xiaobao said, "Are you or are you not my friend?"

Hearing the tone of Wei Xiaobao's voice was slacking, Liu Yizhou was delighted; he hurriedly said, "*Xiaoren* actually does not dare to pull myself up high. If Wei *Xiangzhu* is willing to treat *Zaixia* as a friend, *Zaixia* ... naturally it is what *Zaixia*

always seek but fail to obtain."

"I regard you as a friend," Wei Xiaobao said, "In Jianghu, friends always uphold *yi qi*, right?"

"Yes, yes," Liu Yizhou busily said, "Good friends should uphold *yi qi*."

Wei Xiaobao said, "A friend's wife, you must not touch. If in the future you act like a thief toward my wife, speaking nonsense, then what will happen? I want you make an oath!"

Liu Yizhou groaned inwardly, he realized he had fallen into Wei Xiaobao's trick. Wei Xiaobao said, "It's alright if you don't want to make an oath. I knew it all along that you are sneaky, always harbor malicious intentions, and with heart and soul you want to take liberties with women, you want to fool around with my wife."

Wei Xiaobao waved his dagger again, Liu Yizhou saw flickering white light in front of his eyes. "No, no," he hastily said, "Toward Wei *Xiangzhu*'s wife, *Zaixia* definitely does not dare to harbor any evil intentions."

Wei Xiaobao said, "If you ever cast one more glance to Miss Fang in the future, speak one more word to her, then what will happen?"

Liu Yizhou said, "Then ... then let the Heaven punish me, the Earth extinguish me."

"Then you are a turtle bast@rd!" Wei Xiaobao said.

With a bitter smile Liu Yizhou said, "Right, right!"

"Right what?" Wei Xiaobao said, "Your fart is right?" He put the tip of his dagger onto Liu Yizhou's right eyelid.

Liu Yizhou said, "If in the future I cast one more glance to Fang *Shimei*, speak one more word to her, then I am a turtle bast@rd!"

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud. "Since that's the case," he said, "I'll spare you. I'll drench your head with my pee first, then I'll let you go." Finished speaking, he put the dagger back into his boot, and untied his belt with both hands.

Suddenly from the forest came a female voice, "You ... you are bullying people too far!"

Wei Xiaobao recognized it as Fang Yi's voice; he was pleasantly surprised. Turning his head around, he saw three people come out of the forest; the first to appear was indeed Fang Yi, with Mu Jianping and Xu Tianchuan behind her. A moment later, two more people came out, they were none other than Wu Lishen and Ao Biao.

These five people had been hiding in the forest for quite a long time; they heard everything Wei and Liu, two people's conversation. Seeing Wei Xiaobao was about to pee on Liu Yizhou's head, which would result in deep, unsolvable resentment, Fang Yi could not bear not to shout to stop him.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Turns out you are already here. Looking at Wu *Laoyezi*'s face, you are exempt from being soaked with urine."

Xu Tianchuan hurriedly came over and with both hands pushed aside the rocks and dirt surrounding Liu Yizhou's body. He wrapped his arms around Liu Yizhou and lifted him up, then he untied the belt binding Liu Yizhou's hands and feet. Liu Yizhou was unbearably ashamed; he lowered his head and did not dare to meet anybody's eyes.

Wu Lishen's face turned ashen as he said, "Liu *Xianzhi* [worthy nephew], our lives were saved by Wei *Xiangzhu*, how can you repay kindness with enmity, relying on power to bully the weak? You beat him, your cursed him, and you twisted his arm. If your Shifu find out, how would you explain to him?" He was speaking and shaking his head at the same time, the tone

of his voice showed that he was very upset. He continued, "Living in Jianghu, we pay most particular attention to these two characters '*yi qi*'; how can you use force toward a good friend, to fight over a woman's affection? Forgetting favor and violating justice, that was an action even lower than a pig or a dog!" While saying that, 'Pei!' he spat on the ground. The more he spoke, the angrier he got; he said, "Last night, in the middle of the night, like an explosion of thunder you rushed out, everybody knew something was wrong, thus we went looking for you all the way. You slapped Wei *Xiangzhu*'s cheek red and swollen, you twisted his arm, you threatened his throat with the tip of a dagger; if you slipped and unexpectedly harmed his life, how would you answer to that?"

Liu Yizhou indignantly said, "A life for a life, I'll simply pay for his life with mine."

Wu Lishen angrily said, "Hey, is it that easy? What kind of hero or warrior are you? Do you think you can pay for one of Tian Di Hui's ten *Xiangzhu*, Wei *Xiangzhu*'s life with yours? Besides, where did you get your life from? Wasn't it because of Wei *Xiangzhu*'s help? You are not grateful and seeking to repay the kindness, other people are already looking down on you; unexpectedly you dare to fight Wei *Xiangzhu*?"

When he was forced by Wei Xiaobao to make an oath, Liu Yizhou's life was hanging on Wei Xiaobao's hand; hence he did not any choice but to comply. But now that he was free, he realized that all these speeches were heard by Fang Yi; the shame and resentment he felt in his heart was indeed difficult to bear. Although Wu Lishen was his martial uncle, listening to his endless prattle in lecturing him, he could not stop his shame from turning into anger. Hardening his heart, he said harshly, "Wu *Shishu*, what's done is done. Not even one hair of the one surnamed Wei is injured. You, Senior, can do whatever you want to do to me!"

Wu Lishen jumped up in anger, pointing his finger to Liu Yizhou's face he roared, "Liu Yizhou, you are this disrespectful toward your own *Shishu*. You want to fight me, don't you?"

"I did not say that," Liu Yizhou replied, "I am not your match anyway."

Wu Lishen was even more angry; with a stern voice he said, "If your martial art skill surpasses mine, you are definitely going to fight me, aren't you? In the Qing Palace you were greedy for life, afraid of death. As soon as you heard we were going to be beheaded, you busily begged for mercy in loud voice, hurriedly announced your real name and surname. Considering Liu *Shige*'s face, I sealed my lips and did not say anything about this matter. Humph, humph! Just consider yourself lucky you are not my disciple." It was obvious he was saying that if you were my disciple, I would have killed you with a blade.

Hearing his shameful act as he cowardly begged for mercy in the Qing Palace was exposed, Liu Yizhou hung his head low, his face paled, he did not dare to say anything.

Knowing that he had gained the upper hand, Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Alright, alright. Wu *Laoyezi*, Liu *Dage* was only fooling around with me, please don't take it seriously. I want to ask a favor from you: about the past matter, please don't tell Liu *Laoyezi*."

Wu Lishen said, "Since Wei *Xiangzhu* has instructed such, I will do as told." Turning his head toward Liu Yizhou, he said, "Did you see that? Wei *Xiangzhu* is putting important matter first, showing his great magnanimity."

Wei Xiaobao turned toward Fang Yi and Mu Jianping, he laughed and said, "How did you come here?"

"Come here," Fang Yi said, "I have something I want to tell

you.”

With a giggle Wei Xiaobao came over. Seeing Fang Yi showing that kind of affection toward Wei Xiaobao in front of everybody else, Liu Yizhou’s hand grabbed the handle of his saber; he almost could not restrain himself from pulling the saber, charging forward and fighting Wei Xiaobao to the death. Suddenly he heard a slap, Wei Xiaobao was slapped on the face, a hard and burning slap.

Wei Xiaobao was startled, he jumped back several steps, his hand rubbed his cheek. “You … why did you hit me?” he angrily asked.

Fang Yi raised her willow-shaped eyebrows, her face flushed of anger. “What do you take me for?” she angrily said, “What did you tell Liu *Shige*? You insulted me as frivolous and lowly behind my back?”

“I did not say any … any bad words,” Wei Xiaobao said.

“You still deny it?” Fang Yi said, “I heard everything. You … both of you are not good men.” In her anger and anxiety, she burst into tears.

Xu Tianchuan thought that this was young people's problem, not an important matter at all, but the friendship between Tian Di Hui and Mu Palace must not be harmed; thereupon he laughed aloud and said, "Wei *Xiangzhu* and Liu *Shixiong* were just having misunderstanding, which has been straightened up. Old man Xu is starving, let us quickly find a restaurant, let's eat, drink, and be merry."

Suddenly a northeasterly wind blew, carrying with it raindrops as big as soybeans. Xu Tianchuan looked up to the sky and

said, "For no rhyme or reason the tenth month weather has sent us this rain; it's really unseemly." Seeing the black clouds rolled in from the northeast, he said, "I am afraid this rain will not be light, we'd better look for a place to take shelter."

The seven of them continued their journey along the main road heading west. Fang Yi and Mu Jianping had not fully recovered yet, they had to walk slowly. The rain was getting heavier and heavier, while along the way there was not even a farmhouse or a pavilion. Not too long afterwards, all seven of them were completely soaked. Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Let us walk slowly. Walking fast, we will look like chicken falling in the soup, walking slow, we will look like duck falling in the soup; there is no difference anyway."

After walking for quite a while, the seven of them heard the sound of water, they had reached the river bank. They saw about half a *li* upstream there was a small hut. The seven people were delighted, they hastened toward the hut. When they were near, they saw that the hut was actually a broken-down temple with its wall askew to the east and fell to the west. But although it was broken-down, to take shelter from the rain, this temple was actually better than nothing. The temple gate had already been rotten a long time ago. As soon as they entered, a moldy smell assaulted their nostrils.

After walking for a while, the wound on Fang Yi's chest was really hurting; she could not help but knitting her brows and clench her teeth. Xu Tianchuan tore apart several broken-down table and chairs and built fire, so that everybody could dry their clothes. They saw the black clouds in the sky gathered thicker and thicker, the rain was getting heavier and heavier. From his bundle Xu Tianchuan produced several dry flatbreads and handed them around. Liu Yizhou stuffed the stub of what's left of his pigtail into his hat, it was barely enough to make a braid. With a chuckle Wei Xiaobao looked to the left and to the right.

With a laugh Mu Jianping asked Wei Xiaobao, "Just now, what trick did you play onto Liu *Shige*'s flat cakes?"

Wei Xiaobao stared at her, "I did not!" he said, "What trick can I play?"

"Humph, still don't want to admit it?" Mu Jianping said, "How could Liu *Shige* be hit by knockout drug and lose his consciousness?"

"He was hit by knockout drug?" Wei Xiaobao said, "When? How come I did not know? It can't be, isn't he sitting nicely by the fire to warm himself?"

"Pei!" Mu Jianping spat; feigning anger, she said, "You play dumb, I won't talk to you."

Sitting on the side, Fang Yi was also filled with doubts. When Liu Yizhou grabbed Wei Xiaobao and so on earlier, they were still quite far away, nobody saw it clearly. Afterwards they saw Liu and Wei, two men, were sitting side by side, talking under the tree, hence they quietly walked on tiptoe to hide in the forest. They saw all the flat cakes were taken out by Liu Yizhou from his own bundle, plus Liu Yizhou's eyes had never left Wei Xiaobao at all, tu guard against him running away. How could it be that in the blink of an eye Liu Yizhou suddenly lose his consciousness and fell down?

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Perhaps Liu Shixiong suffers from epilepsy, suddenly it flared-up and he fainted.”

Liu Yizhou was furious, he suddenly sprang up; pointing his finger to Wei Xiaobao he shouted, “You … you little …”

Fang Yi cast Wei Xiaobao a glance. “Come here,” she said.

“You are going to hit me, I don’t want to come,” Wei Xiaobao said.

“You must not say anything bad about Liu Shige,” Fang Yi said, “Even young children must cultivate propriety of speech.” Wei

Xiaobao stuck out his tongue and no longer say anything.

Seeing twice had Fang Yi stood up for him, Liu Yizhou was very relieved inwardly; he mused, “This little demon is crafty and spoiled, Fang Shimei is actually still very good to me.”

The sky gradually darkened. The seven of them sat around the fire. The broken-down temple was leaking everywhere, very few spots were dry. Suddenly the top of Wei Xiaobao’s head was drenched, water was dripping onto his shoulder; he scooted to the left, but the left side was also wet. “Come here,” Fang Yi said, “It’s not leaking over here.” After a short pause, she added, “Don’t be afraid, I am not going to hit you.” Wei Xiaobao laughed, he moved to her side.

Fang Yi puckered her lips and whispered on Mu Jianping’s ear, she spoke few sentences in low voice. Immediately Mu Jianping laughed; she nodded, and then also puckered her lips and whispered on Wei Xiaobao’s ear, “Fang Shijie says, she and you are on the same side; just now she hit you, rebuked you, telling you not to offend Liu Shige, she asked if you understand her meaning?”

Wei Xiaobao also whispered on her ear, “What do you mean ‘on the same side’? I don’t understand.”

Mu Jianping passed on his words to Fang Yi. Fang Yi cast a glance to him, then she said to Mu Jianping, “I have made an oath, calling a curse on myself, I am bound by the oath forever. Tell him not to worry.”

Mu Jianping passed on her words to him. Wei Xiaobao then whispered on Mu Jianping’s ear, “Miss Fang and I are on the same side, but what about you?”

Mu Jianping blushed. “Pei!” she spat, and raised her hand to hit him. Wei Xiaobao laughed while leaning sideways to evade. He repeatedly nodded to Fang Yi. Fang Yi appeared to be smiling, yet she was not smiling; she appeared to be angry, but

she was not angry. Illuminated by the fire, she looked unspeakably sweet and pretty. Smelling the faint fragrance coming from these two ladies' bodies, Wei Xiaobao was very happy.

Liu Yizhou was sitting quite some distance away from these three people, he craned his neck trying to listen; he vaguely heard 'Liu Shige' and 'on the same side', other than those words, he could not hear anything else. Seeing the three of them were laughing and giggling intimately – obviously they were treating him as an outsider, he could not stop jealousy and hatred from appearing together in his heart.

Again Fang Yi said in low voice to Mu Jianping's ear, "Ask him, how did he actually make Liu Shige lost his consciousness?"

Seeing Fang Yi's face showed that she was really curious, Wei Xiaobao quietly told Mu Jianping, "When I went peeing, I turned my back against him, my left hand grabbed a handful of knockout drug. When I turned back to check the flat cakes, I applied the drug powder onto the cakes. The cake that I ate, I picked it with my right hand, my left hand did not touch it at all. Do you understand?"

"So that's how you did it," Mu Jianping said.

After she passed on the message to Fang Yi, Fang Yi asked, "Where did you get the knockout drug from?"

"The Imperial Bodyguards in the Palace gave it to me," Wei Xiaobao replied, "To rescue your Liu *Shige*, that was the drug that I used." By this time the rain was really heavy, the sound of water crashing down on the roof was so loud that Wei Xiaobao's lips had to touch Mu Jianping's ear before his voice could be heard.

Liu Yizhou was very restless, suddenly he stood up, his back happened to bump heavily on the pillar. 'Crack! Crash!' suddenly several tiles from the roof above him fell down. This

broken-down temple was already decayed; soaked by the heavy rain, blown by the north wind, it was unable to withstand. One after another the beams, tiles, bricks and mortars fell down.

"Not good," Xu Tianchuan called out, "This temple is about to collapse; everybody out!" All seven of them rushed out of the temple. Before taking several steps, they heard loud rumbling noise as most of the temple's roof collapsed, followed by almost half of the wall also came down.

Right this moment, they heard the sound of hooves beat, a dozen or so horses galloped from the southeast and in just a short moment arrived at the temple. In the dark of the night they could see the indistinct shadows of the riders. An old-sounding voice said, "Aiyo, originally there was a small temple in here where we can take shelter from the rain, but unfortunately it has collapsed."

Another man asked with a loud voice, "Hey, fellows, what are you doing in here?"

"We were taking shelter from the rain in the temple," Xu Tianchuan replied, "Then this temple collapsed, it almost crushes us to our death."

"Damn it," another man on horseback cursed, "It's such a heavy rain, *Laotianye* [God/Heavens] must be crazy."

Yet another man said, "Zhao *Laosan* [ol' Zhao the third], other than this small temple, is there any other building nearby? Or some caves, maybe?"

The old-sounding voice replied, "There is … there is some, but it's almost as bad as there is not."

A big man cursed, "Your granny, there is or there is not?"

"Northwest of this place," the old man replied, "There is a valley with a haunted house in it, there are evil spirits there,

nobody dares to enter; isn't it about the same as there is not?"

The men on the horseback loudly laughed and swore, "*Laozi* is not afraid of haunted house. Evil spirits are the best, we can catch some for dessert."

Another man shouted, "Quickly lead the way! We are not taking a bath, you think it's nice to soak in this heavy rain?"

"Gentlemen," Zhao Laosan said, "The old man does not dislike long life, I do not dare to go. I advise you not to go either. Northwest of here, about thirty *li* away, there is a small town."

The men on the horseback all said, "This is such a heavy rain, how can we endure it for thirty more *li*? Just stop talking nonsense, we have strength in numbers, why do we have to be afraid of some ghosts?"

"Very well," Zhao Laosan said, "Just go northwest, after rounding a bend, follow the mountain road entering a valley, and walk along that path; you can't possibly miss …" Without waiting for him to finish, the people urged their horses to gallop toward the northwest. Zhao Laosan was riding a donkey. He hesitated for a moment, and then he pulled the animal's head and turned it back to the southeast.

"Wu *Er Ge* [second older brother], Wei *Xiangzhu*," Xu Tianchuan asked, "What do we do?"

"I think …" Wu Lishen started, but suddenly remembered that it was Wei Xiaobao who should make the decision; thereupon he said, "I am asking for Wei *Xiangzhu*'s instruction, what should we do?"

Wei Xiaobao was afraid of ghosts, it's just that he was unable to say it. He said, "Why don't Wu *Dashu* [big uncle] decide? I don't have any idea."

"Evil spirit is nothing," Wu Lishen said, "It's all country folks talking nonsense. Even if there is indeed a ghost, we can stake

everything to fight him.”

“Some ghosts are invisible,” Wei Xiaobao said, “By the time we can see them, it’s already too late.” The implication was clear: he was afraid of ghosts.

Liu Yizhou loudly said, “Why should we fear demons and ghosts? If we are drenched in this rain for one more hour, everybody will be sick.”

Wei Xiaobao saw Mu Jianping was shivering continuously, obviously it was hard for her to endure. He also did not want to show any weakness in front of Fang Yi, and thus lost to Liu Yizhou, thereupon he said, “Alright, let us go together! If we see evil spirit, we must be careful!”

Following Zhao Laosan’s direction, the seven of them went northwest and entered the valley. It was dark and they could not see the road, but through the white curtain of falling rain, they saw cascading water in the forest. Wei Xiaobao said, “We can’t see the road, this is called ‘Ghost Wall’, the evil spirit is bewitching us.”

Xu Tianchuan said, “That cascading water is the road, water from the mountain is flowing down along the mountain path."

“Exactly!” Wu Lishen said, while stepping on the waterfall going upward. The rest of them followed behind him going up the hill.

To the left of them they heard the neigh of the horses, so they knew those dozen or so riders must be on that side. Xu Tianchuan mused, “I wonder what those men’s background is.” But he thought that with he and Wu Lishen joined hands, even a dozen or so ordinary martial art masters should not give them any trouble, thereupon he stepped on the water, climbing up and going down into the forest.

It was even darker inside the forest, they heard the ‘Bang! Bang! Bang!’ of a door being knocked straight ahead, so they

knew there was indeed a building out there. Wei Xiaobao was scared but delighted, suddenly he felt someone stretching out a hand to pull his hand, the palm of the hand was soft, and then someone whispered gently on his ear, “Don’t be afraid!” It was none other than Fang Yi.

They heard the knocking continued, but nobody opened the door. The seven of them came near, and saw a wide expanse of a building in the pitch-black night. The riders shouted at the top of their lungs, “Open the door, open the door! We are seeking shelter from the rain!” But even after shouting for a long while, there was not the least bit of response from inside the house. A man said, “Nobody lives here!” Another man said, “Zhao *Laosan* said it is a haunted house; who dare to live here? Just jump over the wall!” White light flickered, two men unsheathed their weapons and jumped over the wall, and then they opened the gate from the inside. Everybody rushed in.

Xu Tianchuan thought, “Obviously these men are Wulin people, but apparently their martial art skill is not too high.” The seven of them followed in.

Inside the gate, there was a very big courtyard, further in, there was the main hall. Someone took oilcloth bundle from his pocket, he untied it and took out a fire knife and a flint to light a fire. Seeing a candle on the table in the hall, he lighted it. Suddenly seeing a bright light appeared before their eyes, everybody felt a peal of delight and comfort. They also noticed that the tables, chairs and small side tables in the hall were made of red sandalwood, unexpectedly it was the style of a rich family’s home. Xu Tianchuan mused, “There’s no dust on the furniture, the ground is swept this clean, but how can there be no one in the house?”

He heard one of the men said, “This hall is very clean, someone must have lived here.” Another man raised his voice to call out, “Hello! Hello! Is anybody home? Is anybody home?”

The hall was large and the ceiling high, as he shouted, there was a faint echo. When the echo stopped, other than the sound of the rain, all around them there was no other noise. Everybody looked at each other in dismay, they all felt rather strange.

A white-haired elderly man asked Xu Tianchuan, “Are you all Jianghu friends?”

“*Zaixia* surnamed Xu,” Xu Tianchuan replied, “These several people are my family and relatives. We are going to Shanxi to visit a family; unexpectedly we came across this heavy rain. *Daguanye* [high-ranking official master], what is your honorable surname?”

The elderly man nodded; seeing there was an old man, a boy and a couple of women among these seven people, he did not feel suspicious at all, but he did not answer the question either. He said, “This house is a little bit strange.”

One of the men shouted, “Is there anybody here? Are you all dead?” He waited for a moment, but still nobody replied.

The elderly man sat on a chair and pointed to six men and said, “The six of you go to the rear and take a look!” The six men pulled out their weapons and went toward the back of the house. Bending down their waists slightly, they walked very slowly inside, their expressions were rather fearful. The people in the hall heard doors being kicked and unceasing shouts of questions, but nothing unusual happened. The noise went farther and farther, obviously the house was enormous, so that for a moment they had not reached the end of it.

The elderly man pointed to four more men and said, “Go find some firewood and make torches, then follow them inside.” The four men complied and left.

Wei Xiaobao and the others, seven people, were sitting on the ledge of a long window in the hall, nobody said anything. Xu

Tianchuan noticed that as ten of the men went inside, there were eight people left in the hall, they all wore cloth gowns, their appearance looked like gang members of some underground gang, or some escorts from an escort agency, except they were not carrying anything to be escorted. For the time being he was unclear of these men's background.

Wei Xiaobao could not bear not to ask, "*Jiejie*, do you think there's ghost in this house?"

Before Fang Yi could answer, Liu Yizhou preceded her by saying, "Of course there is a ghost! What place never has anybody die there? When there are dead people, there will be ghosts." Wei Xiaobao shivered, he shrank his body smaller. Liu Yizhou continued, "All malicious ghosts in the world bully the virtuous and fear the wicked, especially confused child. Adults' *yang chi* [yang (positive, male) life-force or energy flow] is abundant; hangman ghosts, big-head ghosts, all do not dare to provoke adults."

Fang Yi stretched out her hand from her sleeve to grab Wei Xiaobao's left hand; she said, "People are afraid of ghosts, but ghosts are even more afraid of people. As soon as there is light, the ghost will run away."

They heard footsteps, the six people who went inside first had returned to the hall with very strange expression on their faces; all of them talked at once, "Not a single soul in here, but everywhere is swept clean." "There were beddings on the beds, and shoes under the beds, all women's." "All the clothes in the wardrobes are also women's, there is not a single men's clothing!"

In a loud voice Liu Yizhou shouted, "Female ghosts! All ghosts in this house are female ghosts!" They all turned their heads to look at him; for a moment, nobody made any noise.

Suddenly they heard strange shouts of the four men who

went in later, the elderly man sprang up from his chair. He was just about to rush inside to their rescue when those four men rushed back into the main hall, the torches in their hands were extinguished; they shouted, “Dead men, a lot of dead men!” Their faces had frightened look.

Staying calm and collected, the elderly man said, “Much fuss about nothing. I thought you met with the enemy. Dead men; what’s there to be afraid of?”

“We are not afraid,” one man replied, “It’s just … it’s just bizarre.”

“What’s so bizarre?” the elderly man asked.

Another man replied, “In the east wing, all the rooms are … are mourning hall for dead people; I don’t know how many are there.”

The elderly man hesitated and then asked, “Are there any dead bodies and coffins?”

Two of the men looked at each other, they answered together, “We did not … did not see clearly, perhaps not.”

The elderly man said, “Light more torches, we will go take a look together. Perhaps this is an ancestral hall, which is very common.” Although he tried to play it down, the tone of his voice sounded very apprehensive, apparently he was fully aware that ordinary ancestral hall would not be like this. The men, his subordinates, tore down tables and chairs in the main hall and lighted them as torches, and then they all rushed toward the rear courtyard.

Xu Tianchuan said, “I’ll go to take a look, everybody, please wait here.” And he followed behind the men.

“Shifu,” Ao Biao asked, “Which group [lit. ‘way’] do these people belong to?”

Wu Lishen shook his head, “I can’t see it,” he said, “From their

accents, it appears that they are people from Lu Dong, east of Shanhai Pass region, they don't look like eagle claws of the six-leafed gate. Could they be smugglers? But I did not see them carrying any goods."

Liu Yizhou said, "Nothing serious about that group of men. On the contrary, the large number of female ghosts in this house maybe very difficult to deal with!" Finished speaking, he stuck his tongue out in the direction of Wei Xiaobao.

Wei Xiaobao shivered, he tightly grip Fang Yi's hand, his palm was wet with cold sweat. With a trembling voice Mu Jianping said, "Liu … Liu *Shige*, can you stop scaring other people?"

"Xiao Junzhu," Liu Yizhou said, "You do not need to be afraid, you are a golden branch, jade leaf [nobility], any evil spirit sees you, it will go far away, it won't dare to disturb you. The ones evil spirits detest the most are neither men nor women, court eunuchs." Fang Yi raised her willow-shaped eyebrows, her face carried an angry expression, she was about to speak, but in the end she restrained herself.

After a long time, they heard footsteps as everybody returned to the main hall. Wei Xiaobao let out a relieved breath. Xu Tianchuan said in a low voice, "Seven or eight rooms, a total of more than thirty mourning halls. Each mourning hall has five or six sacrificial offerings, seven or eight memorial tablets. It looks like each mourning hall is dedicated to dead people of one family."

"Hey, hey," Liu Yizhou said, "Won't that mean this house has several hundred evil spirits?"

Xu Tianchuan shook his head; he was an experienced and knowledgeable man, but he had never heard of such a strange thing. A moment later, he slowly said, "The strangest thing is that in front of each mourning hall there was a lighted candle." Wei Xiaobao, Fang Yi and Mu Jianping, three people cried out in

fear together.

One of the men said, “When we went in before, the candles were clearly not lighted.”

“Are you sure?” the elderly man asked. The four men looked at each other, they all shook their heads.

The elderly man said, “It’s not ghost. We are encountering a person of high skill. In an instant he was able to light more than thirty candles on the mourning halls; his movement must be very fast. Xu *Laoyezi*, don’t you think so?” The last sentence was addressed to Xu Tianchuan.

Xu Tianchuan feigned ignorance; he said, “Perhaps we have offended the master of this house. There is no harm … no harm in us going to the mourning hall and … and kowtow several times.”

Amidst the noise of the rain, from the east wing suddenly came the sound of several women wailing, the voice was very mournful; although the sound of the heavy rain was very loud, these wailings could be heard very clearly. Wei Xiaobao was so scared that his mouth was wide open and he was speechless, his countenance changed greatly. Everybody else looked at each other in shock, they were all absolutely horrified. A moment later, from the west wing came the sound of a woman weeping in grief. Liu Yizhou, Ao Biao, as well as two of the men cried out together, “Weeping Ghost!”

“Humph!” the elderly man snorted; suddenly he said in a loud voice, “We are passing by your residence and stop by to take shelter from the rain, and thus trespass your precious residence. I hereby apologize. Would worthy host be willing to grant this request?” His voice was backed by abundant *chi*, it could travel very far.

After a long time, there was not the slightest response from the back. The elderly man shook his head, and then in a loud

voice said, “Since the host is not willing to receive uncouth guests, we have no choice but to disturb without permission. We are taking shelter from the rain in this hall. As soon as it is dawn and the rain stops, everybody will hasten on our journey.” Finished speaking, he made a hand signal telling everybody not to make any noise, while he inclined his head sideways to listen.

A long time passed, they no longer heard the sound of wailing or weeping. A man said in low voice, “Zhang *Sanye* [third master], I don’t care if he is a human or a ghost, come daybreak, we’ll set fire and burn this damn house to the ground.”

The elderly man shook his hand and said, “We have not accomplished our important mission, we must not add another problem. Sit down and rest!”

Everybody’s clothes was wet, thereupon they built fire in the main hall. Someone took out a wine gourd, pulled the plug and handed it over to the elderly man to drink.

The elderly man drank several mouthful of wine, then he cast a sidelong glance to Xu Tianchuan for half a day before saying, “Xu *Laoyezi*, you are all from one family, how come your accents are not the same? You are from the Capital, but these several people are from Yunnan?”

Xu Tianchuan laughed and said, “*Laoyezi* has very good hearing, obviously you are a Jianghu veteran. My oldest *Meizi* [younger sister] got married in Yunnan. This is my *Meifu* [younger sister’s husband].” He pointed to Wu Lishen, and then continued, “My *Meifu* and their children are Yunnan people. My second *Meizi* got married in Shanxi. Southern sky, northern earth [meaning: far apart], for several decades we rarely see each other even for once. This time we are going to Shanxi to visit my second *Meizi*.” When he called Wu Lishen his *Meifu*, he was actually honoring him. At that time, according to custom of

the people of northern China, calling people ‘older maternal uncle’ or ‘younger maternal uncle’ was considered cursing him.

The elderly man nodded. He drank another mouthful of wine. Squinting his eyes, he said, “Are you all from Beijing?”

“Exactly,” Xu Tianchuan replied.

The elderly man said, “Along the way, did you see a thirteen, fourteen years old little eunuch?”

As soon as he said that, Xu Tianchuan and the others’ heart skipped a beat; fortunately the elderly man had his gaze only toward Xu Tianchuan. But Xu Tianchuan’s face did not reveal anything. Ao Biao and Mu Jianping’s countenances changed, but nobody paid them any attention. Xu Tianchuan said, “Did you say eunuch? In Beijing, old eunuchs, little eunuchs, there are so many of them. As soon as I left home, I would come across several eunuchs."

The elderly man said, "I asked you if you saw one along the way, not in Beijing."

Xu Tianchuan laughed and said, "*Laoyezi*, that is out of question. According to the Great Qing's rule, when an eunuch leaves the Capital, he is committing a major crime. Court eunuchs are not like during the Ming Dynasty, with full power and prestige; nowadays, which eunuch dares to leave the Capital for even one step?"

"Oh," the elderly man said, "Perhaps he is in disguise?"

Xu Tianchuan repeatedly shook his head, "I don't think he has that kind of guts!" he said. After a short pause, he asked, "*Laoyezi*, which little eunuch are you looking for? When I return to Beijing after visiting my relatives in Shanxi, I can help you make the inquiry."

"Humph, humph," the elderly man said, "Thank you very much, but I am not sure if I will live that long." Finished

speaking, he closed his eyes and no longer speak.

Xu Tianchuan thought, "He is inquiring about a thirteen, fourteen year's old little eunuch; isn't that Wei *Xiangzhu*? These men are not from Tian Di Hui or Mu Palace, eight or nine out of ten, they do not have any good intention, I must investigate clearly. He does not ask further, we must ask him further." Thereupon he said, "*Laoyezi*, among the little eunuchs in Beijing, only one is very famous. His great name has spread all over the world, I believe you have also heard about him, he is the one who killed that treacherous minister Oboi, the one who set up great merit."

The elderly man opened his eyes and said, "Mm, are you talking about Xiao Guizi, Gui Gong-gong?"

"Who else but him?" Xu Tianchuan said, "This man has guts and is very brave, exceptionally skillful in martial arts, he is really amazing!"

"What does he look like?" the elderly man asked, "Have you seen him?"

"Ha," Xu Tianchuan said, "This Gui Gong-gong strolls around Beijing streets every day. Among Beijing people, I am afraid only a few have never seen him. This Gui Gong-gong is dark and fat, he is quite a plump fellow, he is at least seventeen, eighteen years old; nobody would take him for a fourteen-year-old."

Fang Yi's hand, which was holding Wei Xiaobao's hand tightened; Mu Jianping gently nudged his back with her elbow, they were laughing in their hearts. At first Wei Xiaobao was afraid of the ghosts, but as he heard the elderly man inquiring about himself, he was so busy scheming in his heart that he forgot his fear of the ghosts.

"Is that right?" the elderly man said, "What I heard is quite different. I heard this Gui Gong-gong is only thirteen, fourteen-

year-old little boy, very crafty and smart; perhaps he looks 30% like your nephew [orig. wai sheng - sister's son or wife's sibling's son]. Ha ha, ha ha!" While saying that, he looked at Wei Xiaobao.

Liu Yizhou suddenly said, "I heard that Xiao Guizi is despicable and shameless; all he can do is using the knockout drugs. He was able to kill Oboi, because he had used the drug first, otherwise, this little thief is a coward and afraid of ghosts, how could he succeed in killing Oboi?" Turning to Wei Xiaobao, he chuckled and said, "Cousin [orig. biaodi - younger maternal cousin], don't you agree?"

Wu Lishen was angry; he sent a backhand palm toward Liu Yizhou's face. Liu Yizhou lowered his head to evade, his left foot sprang, his body rose up. Wu Lishen's backhand palm strike was the move 'jade fowl spreading its wings', Liu Yizhou's dodging and springing up was the move 'golden horse neighing into the wind'; both styles belonged to the Mu Family Fist Technique. One struck rapidly, the other dodged quickly, unwittingly they both used their school's unique skills.

The elderly man surnamed Zhang suddenly sprang up and said with a laugh, "Good! You all disguise yourselves really well!" As soon as he stood up, the dozen or so of his men also sprang up. The elderly man barked his order, "Take them all! Don't let even a single one escape!"

Wu Lishen pulled out a short saber from his bosom, his big head shook to the left, he hacked down a man, he shook to the right, the saber cut another man's throat, sending him down to the ground.

The elderly man drew a pair of judge-pens from his waist; brandishing them together, the pens made swishing noise. The left-hand pen pointing toward Wu Lishen's throat, the right-hand pen moved toward the pit of Xu Tianchuan's stomach. With one move attacking two people, his movement was very

fast.

Xu Tianchuan dashed to the right, his left hand clawed a man's eyes. As the man tossed his head back to evade, the saber in his hand was snatched away, suddenly he felt sharp pain on his waist as his own saber had penetrated his own belly. On the other side, Ao Biao was fighting with a man. After hesitating slightly, Liu Yizhou untied his flexible whip and charged forward to join the battle.

Although the other side had more people, the elderly man was the only one who could face Wu Lishen in an evenly matched battle, the rest of them only had mediocre martial art skill. Wei Xiaobao could see this small advantage clearly; he thought, "As long as I don't come across that old tortoise, I might be able to handle the rest of them." Holding the dagger in his hand, he wanted to charge forward.

Fang Yi pulled his back and said, "Our victory is decided, you don't have to help."

Wei Xiaobao mused, "I know our victory is decided, which was why I went forward. If we would definitely be lost, why would I wait here and not run away quickly?"

Suddenly they heard several swishing noise in succession, the elderly man had jumped to the side, the pair of judge-pens in his hands were rubbing against each other, the men under his command quickly squeezed behind him, very soon they had formed a square. With only several steps these men were able to move into position; more than a dozen men moved together without pushing each other, or colliding with each other, an indication that they had been trained very well and had spent a lot of time in this formation.

Xu Tianchuan and Wu Lishen were startled, they withdrew several steps back. Ao Biao charged forward courageously. Suddenly from the square formation four sabers went out

together, two hacked toward his shoulder, two hacked toward his leg; the coordination was really ingenious. Simultaneously, two spears coming out of the formation to meet Ao Biao's saber. "Ah!" Ao Biao cried out, his shoulder was hit by a saber.

"Biao'er, step back!" Wu Lishen called out anxiously. Ao Biao leaped backward to evade. In the blink of an eye, victory or defeat was suddenly reversed.

Xu Tianchuan stood in front of Wei Xiaobao and the two ladies to protect them; he was watching carefully how their opponents were using this formation. He saw the elderly man raised the judge-pen in his right hand and loudly called out, "Hong *Jiaozhu* won't be old for ten thousand years, he will forever enjoy the immortal good-fortune! His long-life is the same as the Heaven's, his long-life is the same as the Heaven's!"

The dozen or so of his men raised their weapons together and cried out, "Hong *Jiaozhu*'s long-life is the same as the Heaven's, his long-life is the same as the Heaven's!" Their voices shook the roof-tiles; they appeared as if they were possessed.

Xu Tianchuan was aghast; he was wondering what kind of trick they were playing. As Wei Xiaobao heard the three words 'Hong *Jiaozhu*', he suddenly remembered Tao Hongying's terrified expression when she was mentioning those words. He blurted out, "Shen Long Jiao! They are from Shen Long Jiao!"

The elderly man's countenance changed. "You also know Shen Long Jiao's reputation!" he said. Lifting high his right hand, he shouted, "Hong *Jiaozhu*'s magical power is extensive. Our Cult triumphs in every battle, wins every fight, no stronghold we cannot overcome, no opponent we cannot broken down. The enemy flees at mere distant sight, they will escape without a trace."

As Xu Tianchuan and the others heard each sentence, their heart trembled. They thought that these people's action was

totally weird, they had never seen anything like this before; facing the enemy, unexpectedly they recited some sentences in loud voice.

Wei Xiaobao called out, "These men chanting incantations, don't fall into their trick! Everybody charge forward to kill!"

They heard the elderly man and his men were chanting quicker and quicker; it was no longer the elderly man chanted one verse and his men followed one verse, but those more than a dozen men were chanting together, "Hong *Jiaozhu*'s magical power protects and blesses, his disciples' courage increases a hundredfold, one can fight a hundred, a hundred can fight ten thousand. Hong *Jiaozhu*'s divine eyes are like lightning, illuminating four directions. Our disciple who kills the enemy and protects the Cult, Hong *Jiaozhu* considers him to be his kin, promotes him into the priesthood. Our disciple who dies in protecting the Cult will rise into the paradise!" Suddenly, with a loud shout they charged forward.

Wu Lishen, Xu Tianchuan and the others raised their weapons to meet the attack, but unexpectedly this time these men's martial art had advanced greatly; each hack of the saber, each thrust of the spear, was several times stronger than before. Like fools or mad people, they brandished their weapons randomly. Not too long afterward, Ao Biao and Liu Yizhou were cut down. One by one Wei Xiaobao, Fang Yi and Mu Jianping were also thrown down. Fang Yi suffered a leg injury, while Mu Jianping was wounded on her arm. Wei Xiaobao's back was also stabbed by a spear, luckily he was protected by his treasured vest, so that the spear did not enter his body; however, the incoming force was too heavy that he was unable to withstand and tumbled down to the ground. Before long, one after another Wu Lishen and Xu Tianchuan were also wounded. The elderly man stretched out his finger and successively sealed the vital acupoints on their bodies.

The men shouted together, "Hong *Jiaozhu*'s magical power is extensive, his long-life is the same as the Heaven's, his long-life is the same as the Heaven's!" Finished shouting, they suddenly sat down together. Sweats gushed out of each man's forehead like spring, their breathing was heavy, as if they were utterly exhausted. In this battle, victory or defeat was decided in less than the time needed to drink a cup of tea, but it was as if these men had fought a hard battle for several hours.

Wei Xiaobao groaned silently; he thought, "Turns out these people know witchcraft, no wonder when mentioning Shen Long Jiao, Tao *Gugu* was so frightened like that. Indeed their magical power is extensive."

The elderly man sat on a chair and closed his eyes to regain his composure. It was quite a while later that he finally stood up. After wiping the perspiration on his forehead, he then paced back and forth in the main hall. Quite a while later, his men started to stand up one by one.

The elderly man turned toward Xu Tianchuan and the others and said, "All of you recite after me together! Listen up, I recite a sentence, you follow a sentence. Hong *Jiaozhu*'s magical power is extensive, his long-life is the same as the Heaven's!"

Xu Tianchuan cursed, "Demonical crooked people, dress up as God, play the devil; you want *laozi* to follow you playing tricks? In your mother's clear autumn night's dream!" The elderly man raised his judge-pen to strike Xu Tianchuan's forehead. 'Bang!' blood gushing out from the wound. Xu Tianchuan cursed, "Dog thief, sorcerer!"

The elderly man asked Wu Lishen, "Are you going to recite or not?" Wu Lishen shook his head before answering. The elderly man raised his judge-pen again to strike his forehead.

When he asked Ao Biao, Ao Biao cursed, "Your granny's long-life is the same as the dog's!"

The elderly man was furious, his judge-pen struck down powerfully, Ao Biao immediately fainted. Wu Lishen shouted, "Biao'er is a real man! You who only know how to use witchcraft, damn it, if you have guts, just kill us all."

The elderly man raised his judge-pen and asked Liu Yizhou, "Are you going to recite or not?"

"I ... I ... I ..." Liu Yizhou stammered.

"Say it," the elderly man said, "Hong *Jiaozhu*'s magical power is extensive, his long-life is the same as the Heaven's!"

Liu Yizhou said, "Hong *Jiaozhu*'s ... Hong *Jiaozhu*'s ..."

The elderly man lightly poked Liu Yizhou's forehead with the tip of his judge-pen; he shouted, "Quickly recite it!"

"Yes, yes," Liu Yizhou said, "Hong *Jiaozhu*'s ... Hong *Jiaozhu*'s long-life is the same as the Heaven's!"

The elderly man laughed aloud and said, "Finally, someone who knows how to take advantage of this matter. You, this kid, may receive less pain." Walking toward Wei Xiaobao, he shouted, "Little demon, recite after me."

Wei Xiaobao said, "I don't need you to recite."

"What?" the elderly man angrily said. He raised his judge-pen.

In loud voice Wei Xiaobao recited, "Wei *Jiaozhu*'s magical power is extensive, his long-life is the same as the Heaven's, he will forever enjoy the immortal good-fortune. Wei *Jiaozhu* triumphs in every battle, wins every fight, no stronghold Wei *Jiaozhu* cannot overcome, no opponent Wei *Jiaozhu* cannot broken down. Wei *Jiaozhu* elevates everybody, everybody will ascend to paradise ..."

When saying 'Wei *Jiaozhu*', the word 'Wei' was spoken vaguely, it was no more than a grunt from his nostril actually; but the elderly man did not realize he was playing a trick, he

thought Wei Xiaobao was saying 'Hong *Jiaozhu*'. Hearing Wei Xiaobao recited several lines in succession, he laughed aloud and praised him, "This child is exceptionally smart." He walked over to Fang Yi and put his hand on her chin, saying, "Hmm, this little girl's appearance is not bad. Now repeat after me nicely."

Fang Yi turned her head around. "I won't recite!" she said.

The elderly man raised his judge-pen to strike, but when he saw her beautiful face under the candle light, he could not bear to do it, so he aimed the tip of the pen to her cheek and loudly said, "Are you going to recite or not? If you say 'I won't recite' one more time, I am going to draw three lines on your cheek."

Fang Yi stubbornly refused to recite, but she did not dare to say those words 'I won't recite' out loud. "Are you going to recite or not?" the elderly man asked again.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Let me recite it for her. I guarantee it will be more pleasant to hear than if she is reciting it herself."

"Who ask you to recite for her?" the elderly man said. Raising his judge-pen, he struck Fang Yi's forehead.

"Ah!" Fang Yi cried out in pain.

Suddenly someone laughed and said, "Zhang *Sanye*, if this little girl does not want to recite, we can strip her clothes." The rest of the men cried out together, "Wonderful, wonderful! That's a great idea."

Liu Yizhou suddenly said, "Why would you want to bully this girl? You want to find the little eunuch, I know where he is."

"Do you?" the elderly man hastily asked, "Where is he? Tell me quickly, tell me quickly!"

Liu Yizhou said, "You must promise not to bother this miss, I will tell you. Otherwise, even if you kill me, I won't say anything."

"*Shige*," Fang Yi sharply said, "I don't need you to care about me."

The elderly man laughed. "Alright," he said, "I promise you I won't bother this miss."

"You have to keep your words," Liu Yizhou said.

The elderly man said, "What I say, naturally the man surnamed Zhang will keep it. That little eunuch is the one who killed Oboi, the one most favored and trusted by the Emperor, Xiao Guizi. Do you really know where he is?"

Liu Yizhou said, "Far in the horizon, but close in front of your eyes!"

The elderly man jumped up; pointing to Wei Xiaobao he said, "Is ... is ... is it him?" His face showed a mixture of surprise and delight.

Fang Yi said, "He is such a child, how can he kill Oboi? Don't listen to his nonsense."

Liu Yizhou said, "That's right, if he did not use knockout drug, how could he kill the number one warrior of Manchuria, Oboi?"

The elderly man was half believing, half doubting; he asked Wei Xiaobao, “Did you or did you not kill Oboi?”

“What if I did?” Wei Xiaobao said, “And what if I did not?”

“Your granny,” the elderly man cursed, “When I looked at you, I knew this little demon is rather demonical. Search him first, we’ll talk later.”

Two of his men immediately stepped forward and untied the bundle Wei Xiaobao carried on his back; they set each article on the table. The elderly man saw pearls, gold and jade, and all kinds of valuables. “This is definitely the goods from the Imperial Palace,” he said, “Uh … what is this?” He picked a thick wad of banknotes, and saw that each note worth either five

hundred *taels* or one thousand *taels*; altogether there were no less than several hundred thousand *taels*. He could not help but was stupefied; he said, “Definitely not wrong, you … you are Xiao Guizi. Take him to the room that side of the building to be interrogated.”

Fang Yi anxiously said, “Don’t … don’t make things difficult for him.” ‘Wah!’ Mu Jianping broke out and cried.

A man grabbed the back of Wei Xiaobao neck, two men picked the valuables from the table, another man took the candlestick and led them all toward the eastern wing of the rear courtyard. The elderly man waved his hand and said, “All of you get out!” The four men left the room and closed the door behind them.

Beaming with joy, the elderly man did not stop rubbing his hands together while he paced back and forth along the room. He said with a laugh, “Seeking around until the iron shoes are worn out but fail to find, without spending any effort the result is obtained. Xiao Guizi Gong-gong, to be able to meet you here today, it is indeed the good fortune of three lifetimes.”

Wei Xiaobao also said with a laugh, “*Zaixia* can meet *Laoyezi* here today, it is indeed the good fortune of six lifetimes, nine lifetimes.” He thought that since they had already searched through his belongings, denying would be useless; he had to act according to the situation and see if he could get by using deceit.

The elderly man was startled; he asked, “What good fortune of six lifetimes, nine lifetimes? Gui Gong-gong, is your honorable self on your way to the Qing Liang Temple on Mount Wutai?”

Wei Xiaobao could not help but was shocked. “This old turtle knew everything,” he thought, “He won’t be easy to cope with.” Thereupon he chuckled and said, “Not only Sire’s martial art skill excels, your skill in casting spells also surpasses Maoshan

Daoshi[65]. Your Shen Long Jiao's reputation is spread all over the world, indeed there is a reason behind it. *Zaixia* has already heard about it a long time ago, today I can see it with my own eyes, it is worthy of my utmost admiration." He spoke whatever came into his mind to change the subject, ignoring the original question altogether.

The elderly man asked, "Where did you hear about Shen Long Jiao's reputation?"

Wei Xiaobao said thoughtlessly, "I heard it from Ping Xi Wang Wu Sangui's son, Wu Yingxiong. On his father's order he came to Beijing to pay tribute. Among his subordinates there was a warrior by the name of Yang Yizhi, and then there were several martial art experts from Jin Ding School of Liao Dong. They were talking about wiping out the Shen Long Jiao, saying that in the Shen Long Jiao there is some Hong *Jiaozhu*, whose magical power is extensive, the number experts under his command is extremely numerous. He had a Cult member sent to the Bordered Blue Banner's Banner Commander's house on a mission to obtain a copy of the 'Forty-two-chapter sutra'. He was indeed very formidable." Wei Xiaobao was proficient in using deceits; he knew he could not tell lies all the time. If he said nine sentences of truth and one sentence of lie, it would be much easier to deceive people.

The more the elderly man heard, the more he was amazed; he had heard the names of Wu Yingxiong and Yang Yizhi. But about an important personage of his Cult being an officer under the Bordered Blue Banner's Banner Commander, it was a top secret mission of their Cult. It was only more than a month ago that he advertently found out about it. He had also vaguely heard about a scripture called the 'Forty-two-chapter sutra', but as for the details, he was completely in the dark. He busily asked, "Ping Xi Wang and our Shen Long Jiao have neither resentment nor enmity, why would they want to create trouble

without any reason? Speaking about 'wiping out', two characters, it is indeed a reckless act."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Naturally Wu Yingxiong and the others did not have either resentment or enmity with Shen Long Jiao. Speaking about Hong *Jiaozhu*'s ability, they have nothing but admiration. But since Shen Long Jiao has obtained the most valuable treasure, the amazing book 'Forty-two-chapter sutra', they simply have to get it from you. Isn't there a plump lady in your honorable Cult by the name of Liu Yan, Liu *Dajie* [big sister], working in the Palace?"

"Uh, how did you know?" the elderly man asked in amazement.

Wei Xiaobao was spouting nonsense, as long as he thought it had some connection with Shen Long Jiao, he would mention it. But his mind was racing fast, he said, "This Liu *Dajie*'s friendship with me is really not bad. Once she offended the Empress Dowager, the Empress Dowager wanted to kill her, luckily I put an effort to save her, I hid her under my bed. The Empress Dowager was looking for her everywhere in the Palace, but could not find her. This fat *Dajie* was very grateful for my kindness in saving her that she persuaded me to join Shen Long Jiao. She said that Hong *Jiaozhu* is very fond of children like me, he would surely give me great benefits in the future."

"Um," the elderly man was more convinced, he asked, "Why would the Empress Dowager want to kill Liu Yan? Aren't they … aren't in a very good term with each other?"

"Yes, they are," Wei Xiaobao said, "They are actually *Shijie*, *Shimei*. Why would the Empress Dowager want to kill Liu *Dajie* then? Liu *Dajie* said that it was a very top secret; she did tell me, but I have promised her I will never reveal the secret, therefore, I cannot tell you about it. Anyway, just recently, to the Empress Dowager's Palace of Compassionate and Peaceful

came a man disguised as a woman, a fake palace maid. This man's head is bald …"

"Deng Bingchun?" the elderly man blurted, "You also know when Deng *Dage* entered the Palace?"

Actually, Wei Xiaobao had no idea that the fake palace maid was called Deng Bingchun, but his face showed an all-knowing expression; with a smile he said, "Zhang *Sanye*, this is top secret, you must never reveal it in front of anybody else. Otherwise, all hell will break loose. It's alright for you and me to talk about it, but if there were a third person in here, even if he was your most trusted aide, you absolutely cannot breathe a single word. If this matter is exposed and Hong *Jiaozhu* is angry, I am afraid even you yourself will have to face an enormous trouble."

He had lived in the Palace long enough to know that in the imperial court and in the Palace, divulging a secret was a major crime; the heaviest punishment would be beheading and confiscation of the family's property, the lightest punishment would be forever losing the opportunity to advance in his career. For this reason, everybody was very secretive, sneaky, appeared to be shrouded in profound mystery, on the surface they pretended to know everything, it's just that it was inconvenient to tell you. When he used this trick on that old man surnamed Zhang, as expected, it was like 'setting up a pole and see the shadow' [instant effect], he got the desired effect on the spot. Within the clan, society, cult and sect of the Jianghu, the way the superiors control the subordinates was actually no different than the imperial court, the different was just in the degree of finesse with which that control was executed.

As soon as the elderly man heard those words, he was secretly alarmed and afraid, thinking, "How can I be this careless, that I tell this kind of matter to a kid? I must not

spare this kid, when this important matter is done, I must kill him to shut his mouth." He could not help but looked embarrassed. Forcing a laughed, he asked, "What did you talk about with our Deng *Shixiong*?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "What I talked about with Deng *Shixiong* is exactly what he wanted me to report to Hong *Jiaozhu*. When I see *Jiaozhu* in the future, naturally I will make a detail report to him."

"Yes, yes," the elderly man said. He was frightened by Wei Xiaobao putting on airs like that, yet he was not sure about this child's origin, thereupon he put on an amiable manner and said, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, you are going to Mount Wutai, naturally to meet Deputy Chief Rui Dong, is that right?"

Wei Xiaobao thought, "He knew I am going to Mount Wutai, he also knew the Rui Dong affair; he definitely got this information from the old wh0re. The old wh0re called that bald fake palace maid as *Shixiong*, that bald man was an important personage of Shen Long Jiao, turns out the old wh0re is ganging up with the Shen Long Jiao. *Laozi* has fallen into their hands, indeed I've gone through nine deaths and still alive, went through eighteen death and half alive [narrow escape]." He faked an amazed expression, "Uh," he said, "Zhang *Sanye*, your news is actually very quick, you even know about Deputy Chief Rui."

The elderly man smiled and said, "I also know about someone whose background is ten thousand times more important than Deputy Chief Rui."

Wei Xiaobao groaned inwardly, "Bad, it's bad! The old wh0re told him everything. Other than Emperor Shunzhi, whose background is ten thousand times more important than Rui Dong?"

The elderly man said, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, you don't need to conceal

anything from me. You are going up Mount Wutai, are you acting under someone else's order, or are you going on your own initiative?"

"I am an eunuch in the Palace," Wei Xiaobao said, "If I am not acting under someone else's order, how can I dare to leave the Capital? Do you think I dislike having a long life?"

"If that's the case," the elderly man said, "Was it His Majesty who sent you?"

Wei Xiaobao pretended he was surprised greatly. "His Majesty?" he said, "Did you say His Majesty? Haha, this time your source of information is inaccurate. How would His Majesty know about Mount Wutai?"

"If not His Majesty, then who sent you?" the elderly man asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Go ahead, guess."

The elderly man said, "Could it be the Empress Dowager?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Sure enough Zhang *Sanye* is good, one guess and you got it. In the Palace, those who know about Mount Wutai are only two people and a ghost."

"Two people and a ghost?" the elderly man repeated.

"Precisely," Wei Xiaobao said, "Two people: one is the Empress Dowager, the other is *Zaixia*. The ghost is Hai Dafu, Hai Laogong. He was killed by the Empress Dowager using the 'Transforming Bones Soft Palm'."

The muscles on the elderly man's face twitched; he said, "Transforming Bones Soft Palm, Transforming Bones Soft Palm. Turns out it was the Empress Dowager who sent you. But what does the Empress Dowager want you to do?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "The Empress Dowager and you are on the same side, there is no harm in you asking her,

the Senior.”

If these words were said as soon as they entered the room, the elderly man would most likely slap Wei Xiaobao on the ear; but after hearing Wei Xiaobao’s explanation earlier, his mind was confused and undecided. He muttered to himself, “Hm, the Empress Dowager sent you to Mount Wutai.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “The Empress Dowager said that she has already sent someone to report to Hong *Jiaozhu* about this matter, and Hong *Jiaozhu* has given his complete endorsement. The Empress Dowager instructed me to do this mission well, and then she will reward me handsomely, Hong *Jiaozhu* might also reward me with great benefit.” He repeatedly mentioned ‘Hong *Jiaozhu*’, three characters, since he knew the old man in front of him was extremely afraid of Hong *Jiaozhu*; he only needed to allude that Hong *Jiaozhu* held a very high regard of himself, then the old man would not dare to harm him.

With such a bluff, although the elderly man was skeptical, he would still rather believe than disbelieve; he asked, “Those six people outside, are they your subordinates, your attendants?”

“All of them are from the Palace,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “The two ladies are palace maids, the Empress Dowager’s personal attendants. The four men are Imperial Bodyguards, the Empress Dowager sent them out to help me on this mission. They don’t know anything about Shen Long Jiao. This kind of secret information, naturally the Empress Dowager would not tell them …” Speaking to this point, he noticed that the elderly man’s face showed a sneer; he knew something was not right. “What is it?” he asked, “You don’t believe me?”

With a cold laugh the elderly man said, “Yunnan’s Mu Family people are loyal to the previous Ming Dynasty, how can they enter the Palace and be Imperial Bodyguards? When you tell a lie, you should have consistency.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud. The elderly man asked in consternation, “What are you laughing about?” He had never imagined that when his lie was exposed, when it was hard for him to justify himself, oftentimes Wei Xiaobao would laugh, so that the other side would feel that surely it was they who were completely mistaken, that they were being naïve and ridiculous. Now that their hearts had been emptied, when Wei Xiaobao continued to cover up a lie, the other party would not dare to press excessively.

Wei Xiaobao laughed several times and then said, “The one people of Mu Palace hate the most is neither Empress Dowager nor His Majesty. But I am afraid you don’t know anything about it.”

“How can I not know?” the elderly man said, “The one people of Mu Palace hate the most is naturally Wu Sangui.”

Wei Xiaobao feigned astonishment. “Amazing,” he said, “Zhang *Sanye*, I won’t conceal anything from you: the Mu Palace people are willing to work for the Empress Dowager for the purpose of having Wu Sangui executed along with his entire family unto the third generation, that even chicken and dogs of the Ping Xi Wang Mansion will not be spared. Let’s not mention there are Mu Palace people in the Imperial Palace, do you think they do not have people planted in the Ping Xi Wang Mansion? It’s just that this matter is a top secret; you and I are on the same side, so it’s alright for me to tell you, but you must never leak this secret out.”

The elderly man nodded. “So that’s how it is,” he said. But in his heart he only believed 30% after all; he pondered, “I’d better ask the people outside, see if their confession matches with his. Asking that little girl is the best, it’s easier to get the truth from little kids.” Immediately he turned around, pushed the door and walked out.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly alarmed. “Hey, hey,” he called out,

“Where are you going? This is a haunted house, how … how can you leave me alone in here?”

“I will be back shortly,” the elderly man replied. Closing the door behind him, he went to the main hall in quick steps.

Wei Xiaobao’s palms were clammy. The candlelight flickered, making the shadows on the white wall trembled continuously, as if each shadow was a specter. All around him not a sound was heard.

Suddenly, from the outside came a man was shouting loudly, “Where are you all going?” It was precisely the elderly man’s voice. Wei Xiaobao was originally very frightened, after hearing the elderly man’s voice was filled with terror, he was so scared that he almost pass out. “Have they … have they all disappeared?” he called out.

He heard the elderly man loudly calling out again, “Where are you? Where have you gone?” As soon as these two sentenced were finished, silence fell.

After a while, Wei Xiaobao heard someone rushing toward him; he heard the noise of doors being kicked open one by one, and then that elderly man crashed into the room. Wei Xiaobao screamed. He saw the elderly man’s man face was devoid of any color, his eyes were bulging out, as he breathlessly said, “They … they are … are gone.”

“They … they must be captured by the malicious ghosts,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Let us … let us run away quickly!”

“This is not happening,” the elderly man said; his left hand held on to the table for support, the table was creaking, obviously in his heart he was quite frightened. He turned around and walked back to the door, opened the door wide and shouted, “Where are you? Where are you?” And then he stopped and cocked his head to listen, but in the quiet night all they could hear was the sound of several women weeping. He

was at a loss of what to do, he stood at the threshold for a moment, and then took several steps backward, closed the door, picked up the door bolt and bolted the door from the inside. He saw Wei Xiaobao's round little eyes revealed dread, as he could not take his gaze off the elderly man. He saw he was clenching his teeth, his face alternated between blue and white.

The heavy rain had stopped for a moment. Suddenly, there was an intermittent downpour sprinkled the roof, making a 'shua, shua' noise. "Ah," the elderly man exclaimed, and sprang up. It was a moment later that he finally said, "It's … raining … raining again."

Suddenly from the main hall came a soft woman's voice, "Zhang *Laosan* [ol' Zhang the third], come out!" Although the voice did not sound old, it was not tender and lovely either; definitely it did not belong to either Fang Yi or Mu Jianping. The voice still carried three parts of sadness and shrill.

"Female ghost!" Wei Xiaobao whispered.

The elderly man loudly said, "Who's calling me?"

No answer from the outside. Other than the pitter patter of the rain, there was no other noise. The elderly man and Wei Xiaobao looked at each other in dismay. The hair on both men's bodies stood up.

After quite a while later, the same woman's voice called out again, "Zhang *Laosan*, come out!"

The elderly man mustered his courage. He kicked with his left foot, 'bang!' the door flew outward, the door bolt was still hanging on the door frame. He hacked down with his right palm, 'crack!' the bolt broke in the middle; and then he walked out. "Don't go out!" Wei Xiaobao anxiously said, but the elderly man had already rushed toward the main hall.

As soon as the elderly man left, silence fell once again; there was no sound of cursing or fighting, not even the sound of footsteps was heard. A burst of cold breeze blew from outside, carrying quite a bit of rain with it, most of it fell on Wei Xiaobao’s body. He shuddered from cold. He wanted to open his mouth and shout, but did not have enough courage to do so. ‘Bang!’ suddenly the door was blown by the wind, it hit the door frame and immediately swung back out.

Wei Xiaobao was the only one left in this haunted house, naturally there were also quite a number of malicious ghosts, who could come into the room to strangle him death anytime. Fortunately, after waiting for a long, long time, no evil spirit had ever entered the room. Wei Xiaobao comforted himself, "Oh, that's right! Evil spirits only harm grownups, they won't harm children. Perhaps they have eaten many people and are full already. If it's daylight, it would be better!"

Suddenly another burst of cold wind blew in, the candle flickered and died. Wei Xiaobao screamed. He could feel that there was a ghost in the room. He knew the ghost was standing right in front of him; although it was pitch-black and he could not see a thing, he was very sure that the ghost was standing right there.

"Hey, hey, you don't have to harm me," Wei Xiaobao stammered, "I ... I am also a ghost, we are on the same side! No, no ... we all are ghosts, we are fellow ghosts. It's ... it's useless for you to harm me." [Translator's note: the phrase 'on the same side' actually came from '自己人' zi ji ren (lit. our own man), he changed it into '自己鬼' zi ji gui (our own ghost).]

The ghost coldly said, "You don't need to be afraid, I won't harm you." It was a female ghost's voice.

Hearing these ten words, Wei Xiaobao's spirit was aroused; he said, "You said you won't harm me, you can't possibly harm me.

A real man's word is like a mountain, if you harm me, then you are in the wrong."

The ghost coldly said, "I am not a ghost, neither am I a real man. I am asking you: that arrogant official of the imperial court, Oboi, was it really you who killed him?"

"You are really not a ghost?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "Are you Oboi's enemy, or his friend?"

After he asked that question, the other side did not say anything. Temporarily Wei Xiaobao could not decide how he was going to answer her question. If the other side was Oboi's enemy, the 'enemy ghost', being straightforward and admit it would be best; but if she was Oboi's close relative, the 'family ghost', would it be really bad if he admit it? In that instant, his gambler instinct flared up; he thought, "Whether it will be 'big' or 'small', I will have to bet a treasure. If I bet correctly, she will regard me as *Da Laoye* [big master]. If I bet wrong, I will lose everything, including my life!" Thereupon with a loud voice he said, "Damn it, Oboi was indeed killed by *laozi*; what do you want? *Laozi* stabbed him with a dagger on his back, he immediately went to see Yan Wang. If you want revenge, just make your move. If *laozi* ever knit my brows, I am not a hero or a warrior."

The woman coldly asked, "Why did you kill Oboi?"

Wei Xiaobao thought, "If you are Oboi's friend, it would still be useless if I shift the blame to the Emperor, you won't spare me anyway. Since I have already placed my bet, if I lose, *laozi* will lose everything, but if I win, I will gain everything." With a loud voice he said, "Oboi killed innumerable good people under the heavens, although *laozi* is young, my heart is filled with anger. It so happened that he offended the Emperor; I seized the opportunity to kill him. A real man is fully responsible of his action. Let me tell you this: even if that dog thief Oboi did not offend the Emperor, I would still look for an opportunity to

surreptitiously make my move to take revenge and wipe out a grudge on the behalf of common people under the heavens who suffer hardship and calamity under his hands."

He learned these words from Tian Di Hui's Green Wood Hall people. Actually, the reason he killed Oboi was simply following Kangxi's order; 'taking revenge and wiping out a grudge on the behalf of common people under the heavens who suffer hardship and calamity under his hands' and so on did not even register in his mind.

After he spoke those words, the woman in front of him fell silent without saying anything. Wei Xiaobao's heart was thumping madly; he was wondering if he was betting correctly or not. After waiting for a long time, he thought he heard a light breeze. The woman, whom he was still unsure whether she was a ghost or not, had already floated out of the room.

Wei Xiaobao tried to rock his body several times, but his acupoint was sealed, he was unable to move at all. "Damn it," he mused, "The dice have been rolled, but the lid has not been lifted. Won't it make me hung in suspense?"

Just now he was following his impulse and thought that in this high-stake gambling, he would not care about winning or losing; but now that he had calmed down, the more he thought about it, the more he was convinced that the woman talking to him a moment ago was a ghost and not a human. She was a female ghost, Oboi was a male ghost; most likely those two ghosts had something dubious between them. Those two were most probably 'fellow ghosts' [*zi ji gui*, see my note above], who were 'opponent ghosts' to Wei Xiaobao; something was really wrong here.

The double-door was blown by the wind and banging against each other, the clothes on his body had not yet dried, the cold wind blew intermittently, he could not help but shivered.

Chapter 17
Violently knocking on Buddhism's gate is not easy, reopening the net of doubt with an example.
(Translated by Foxs)

Wei Xiaobao handed over the gift one by one, while attentively looking at each monk's face. But after he finished handing over more than fifty sets of gifts, he could not find even a single monk with one or two part resemblance to the young emperor.

Suddenly a beam of light appeared some distance away, coming slowly toward the room. Wei Xiaobao was greatly

alarmed, “Ghost light, ghost light!” he said in his heart. The light was coming closer and closer, turned out it was a lantern, carried by a female ghost wearing white clothing. Wei Xiaobao hastily closed his eyes. He heard the intermittent sound of footsteps, which stopped right in front of him.

He was so scared that he did not dare to breathe, his whole body trembled, but he heard a young girl’s voice laughing. “Why are you closing your eyes?” she asked. Her voice was gentle, soft and pleasant to the ears.

“Don’t scare me,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I … I don’t dare to look at you.”

The female ghost laughed and said, “You are afraid blood coming out of my seven orifices and my tongue stretched out, aren’t you? Why don’t you take a quick look?”

With a trembling voice Wei Xiaobao said, “I won’t fall into your trick. You have your hair disheveled and blood coming out of my seven orifices. What … what’s so good to look at?”

The female ghost giggled; she blew a puff of air onto his face. As the air arrived on his face, Wei Xiaobao felt it was warm, and carried a faint smell of delicate fragrance. Wei Xiaobao opened his left eye a slit, he vaguely saw a snow white face, with curved eyebrows and small mouth, her dimpled face looked like flower. Immediately he opened both eyes wide, and now he could see an extremely delicate and pretty young girl’s face, approximately thirteen, fourteen years of age; her hair was tied into a pair of buns on top of her head, she was grinning as she looked at him. Wei Xiaobao’s heart was greatly comforted, “You really are not a ghost?” he asked.

The young girl smiled and said, “Of course I am a ghost, I am a hangman ghost.” [ghost from someone who died of hanging; is there any English term for it?]

Wei Xiaobao’s heart jumped; he was startled and at a loss.

The young girl said with a laugh, “How could you boldly kill evil man, but is so timid in front of a hangman ghost?”

Wei Xiaobao let out a breath and said, “I am not afraid of people, I am afraid of ghosts.”

The young girl giggled again and asked, “Which of your acupoint is sealed?”

“I wish I knew,” Wei Xiaobao replied. The young girl massaged the back of his shoulder, she also slapped his back lightly three times. Immediately Wei Xiaobao was able to move his hands. He raised his arms and waved them twice; he laughed and said, "You know how to unseal the acupoint; that's wonderful!"

The young girl said, "I learned it not too long ago, today is the first time I've tried it on you."

She then proceeded by massaging his underarm and waist for a moment. Wei Xiaobao sprang up and said with a laugh, "Stop it, stop it! I am ticklish." In this way, the acupoints on his legs were unsealed. He stretched out his hands and said with a laugh, "You tickled me, now I must tickle you back." While saying that, he took a step forward.

The young girl stuck out her tongue and made a face. But she her supposedly ugly face looked extremely cute and did not look frightening at all. Wei Xiaobao reached out trying to pinch her tongue. The young girl turned her head to evade; she giggled tenderly and said, "Now you are not afraid of hangman ghost?"

"You have a shadow," Wei Xiaobao said, "Your body is warm, you are a human, not a ghost."

The young girl opened her eyes wide; she grimly said, "I am a zombie, not a ghost!"

Wei Xiaobao was startled. Under the lantern light he could see her pinkish complexion; he laughed and said, "Zombies cannot

bend their legs, they can't talk either."

The young girl laughed again and said, "In that case, I am a fox-spirit."

Wei Xiaobao laughed, "I am not afraid of fox-spirit," he said. But inwardly he was somewhat suspicious, "Could she be really a fox-spirit?" Walking around her, he looked at her back.

The young girl laughed and said, "I am a thousand-year fox-spirit, my magical skill is very deep, I don't have a tail."

Wei Xiaobao said, "To such a good-looking fox-spirit like you, I don't mind if you bewitch me that I die."

The young girl blushed slightly; she put a finger on her face to shame him, saying, "You are shameless. Just a moment ago you were so afraid of ghosts, and now you are taking advantage of me."

Wei Xiaobao was afraid of, number one: zombie, number two: ghost. As for the fox-spirit, he was not particularly afraid. He saw that this young girl was affable, compared to Fang Yi and Mu Jianping, she was considerably friendlier. Much less she spoke with Jiangnan accent, which was a lot more pleasant to the ear than Fang and Mu, two girls' Yunnan accent. "Miss," he said with a laugh, "What is your name?"

"I am Shuang'er," the young girl replied, "Shuang from 'yi shuang' [a pair]."

Wei Xiaobao laughed, "That's very good," he said, "I wonder if you are a pair of fragrant shoes, or a pair of smelly socks."

Shuang'er laughed and said, "A pair of smelly socks is good, a pair of fragrant shoes is also good; you decide. Gui Gonggong, you are dripping wet, surely it is very uncomfortable, please come over there and change into dry clothes. It's just that there is a problem, you must not blame me."

"What problem?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"We do not have any men's clothes in here," Shuang'er replied.

Wei Xiaobao's heart jumped, immediately his countenance changed, "This house is full of female ghosts," he mused.

Shuang'er raised the lantern and said, "Please come this way." Wei Xiaobao hesitated, he did not know what to do. Shuang'er was already at the door; she turned her head around to wait for him. With a smile she said, "Putting on women's clothes, you are afraid it will be inauspicious, aren't you? Let's do it this way then: you stay on the bed, I'll get hot iron to dry your clothes."

Seeing her gentle and soft expression, and how she was being very considerate, Wei Xiaobao found it hard to refuse; he had no choice but to follow her out the door. "What happened to my companions?" he asked, "Where are they going?"

Shuang'er halted while he walked two more steps, and then walking side by side with him, she said in low voice, "Third Mistress' [orig. 'san shao nai' - third young madame] order: I must not tell you anything. Wait until you have had some refreshments, then Third Mistress herself will tell you everything." Wei Xiaobao had been very hungry for a long time, hearing that he was going to get some refreshment, his spirit was aroused considerably.

Shuang'er took Wei Xiaobao along a pitch-black corridor into a dark room. She lighted the candle on the table. The room only had a bed and a table, the furnishing was simple, but it was very clean. The bed was covered in cotton quilt. Shuang'er lifted a corner of the quilt and let down the mosquito net, saying, "Gui *Xianggong* [lord/master/young gentleman, etc.], take off your clothes on the bed and tossed it to me."

Following her instruction, Wei Xiaobao jumped onto the bed, removed all his clothes and crawled underneath the quilt before tossing the clothes outside the net. Shuang'er caught the

clothes, walked toward the door, and said, "I'll get the refreshment. Do you prefer sweet *zongzi*[66], or salty *zongzi*?"

"My stomach is growling of hunger," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Even if you give me mud *zongzi*, I'll eat three." Shuang'er laughed and walked out.

As soon as she left, Wei Xiaobao felt the room was extremely quiet. Looking at the flickering candle, sometimes it brightened, sometimes it dimmed, his fear returned. "Aiyo, not good," he mused, "When female ghosts invite people to eat noodles, eat wonton, they actually serve earthworm and caterpillar. I must not be fooled."

After a while, Wei Xiaobao smelled the sweet fragrance of meat and sugar. Shuang'er was back with a wooden tray on her hands, she used her elbow to push the mosquito net aside. Wei Xiaobao saw four already unwrapped *zongzi* on a plate, and was delighted. In all honesty, he was very hungry so that even if the *zongzi* was stuffed with earthworm and caterpillar, he would eat it first and talk about it later. Therefore, he picked the chopsticks and started to eat. When the *zongzi* entered his mouth, it tasted sweet and incomparably tasty. After two bites, he said, "Shuang'er, this tastes like Huzhou's *zongzi*, it's really good."

Zongzi produced by Huzhou prefecture of Zhejiang province has soft rice and tasty meat-stuffing; it was unparalleled in the world. Yangzhou had a Huzhou *zongzi* shop. The patrons of Lovely Spring Courtyard often sent Wei Xiaobao to buy some. The *zongzi* was wrapped using bamboo leaves, so it was difficult for Wei Xiaobao to steal, but he always managed to squeeze some rice out of the corner of the *zongzi* and had a taste. Ever since he arrived at the north, he could not find Huzhou's *zongzi* any longer.

Shuang'er was amazed; she said, "You are very

knowledgeable, you can tell by eating it that it is Huzhou's *zongzi*."

Wei Xiaobao was busy chewing as he mumbled, "So this is really Huzhou's *zongzi*? How can you buy Huzhou's *zongzi* in this place?"

Shuang'er laughed and said, "We did not buy it, it's from fox-spirit ... (tee hee) fox-spirit magic."

"Fox-spirit magical power is extensive," Wei Xiaobao praised. Suddenly Zhang Laosan and his men came to his mind, thereupon he added, "It's long-life is the same as the Heaven's!"

Shuang'er laughed. "Enjoy your meal; I'll iron your clothes." After only taking a step, she asked, "Are you still afraid?"

Wei Xiaobao's fear had diminished for the most part, but when all is said and done, he was still somewhat scared; he said, "Come back quickly."

"Yes!" Shuang'er promised.

Not too long afterwards, Wei Xiaobao heard 'chi chi' noise. Shuang'er was back carrying an iron with glowing red coal in it. She spread his clothes on the table, so that while ironing, she could keep him company.

Of the four *zongzi*, two were savory, two were sweet. Wei Xiaobao ate three, and he could not eat anymore. He said, "These *zongzi* are very good. Did you wrap them yourself?"

"Third Mistress seasoned and mixed the ingredients, I helped her wrapping them," Shuang'er replied.

Hearing she spoke with a Jiangnan accent, Wei Xiaobao's heart was moved. "Are you from Huzhou?" he asked.

Shuang'er hesitated and did not answer. "When the clothes are ironed," she said, "And Gui *Xianggong* see the Third

Mistress later, you can ask her yourself, all right?" She was speaking soft and gentle words, her manner was very respectful.

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "What's there not all right?" He lifted the mosquito net to look at her ironing his clothes.

Shuang'er looked up and smiled at him, she said, "You are not wearing any clothes, you may catch cold."

Suddenly Wei Xiaobao's mischievousness arose; he raised his body and called out, "I am going to jump out without any clothes on, I can't possibly catch cold." Shuang'er was shocked, but then she saw he slid down and hid underneath the quilt that even his head was not visible; she could not help but giggle.

About the time needed to eat a bowl of rice later, Shuang'er handed the ironed clothes over to the bed. Wei Xiaobao put it on and climbed down of the bed. Shuang'er helped him buttoned the jacket. She took out a small wooden comb to comb his hair and plait a braid. Wei Xiaobao smelled the light delicate fragrance coming from her body; he was very happy. "Turns out fox-spirits are such nice people."

Shuang'er pouted and said with a laugh, "What fox-spirit? It's so unpleasant to hear. I am not a fox-spirit."

"Ah, I know," Wei Xiaobao exclaimed, "You are a great immortal; I must not call you fox-spirit."

Shuang'er laughed and said, "I am not a great immortal either, I am just a little servant girl."

"I am a little eunuch, and you are a little servant," Wei Xiaobao said, "Both of us are serving other people, we are a couple."

"You are serving the Emperor," Shuang'er said, "How can do I compare to you? One in the sky, the other on the earth." While

chatting, the braid was finished.

Shuang'er said, "I can't plait men's braids, I don't know if this is alright?"

Wei Xiaobao pulled the braid to the front and had a look. "Very good," he said, "I hate plaiting braids the most. It would be good if you could help me plaid my braid every day."

"I may not have that good fortune," Shuang'er said, "You are a big hero. Today I can plait your braid, it can already be considered that in the previous incarnation I have cultivated enough virtue."

"Aiyo," Wei Xiaobao said, "No formalities, please. You are such a smart and beautiful woman, and you plaited my braid. It was me who in my previous incarnation has knocked seventeen, eighteen big wooden fish[67]."

Shuang'er's face blushed; she said in low voice, "I am speaking sincerely, yet you are making fun of me."

"I am not, I am not," Wei Xiaobao said, "I am also speaking sincerely."

Shuang'er smiled and said, "The Third Mistress says that whenever Gui Xianggong wishes, you may go and sit in the rear hall."

"Very well," Wei Xiaobao said, "Your Third (Young) Master is not home?"

"Um," Shuang'er hesitated, "He passed away," she said quietly. Remembering the many mourning halls in the house, Wei Xiaobao's heart trembled; he did not dare to ask anymore question.

Following behind her, they arrived at a tiny fancy-looking reception room at the rear hall. He sat down, Shuang'er immediately served a cup of hot tea. Wei Xiaobao's heart was

beating fast, he did not dare to chat with her again.

A moment later, he heard light and slow footsteps, from behind the wooden partition a young madame appeared, her entire body was covered in white-silk mourning dress. "Gui *Xianggong* must have had an exhausting journey," she said. While saying that she bowed deeply, her manner was very respectful.

Wei Xiaobao hastily returned the propriety and said, "I do not dare."

"Gui Xianggong, please sit down," the young madame said.

Wei Xiaobao noticed that the young madame was about twenty six, twenty seven years of age, she was not wearing any cosmetics, her complexion pale, her eyes were red, obviously she had just been crying. Under the lantern light unexpectedly he saw that she had a shadow; although she looked gloomy and grim, most probably she was not a ghost. In his heart, however, he was still apprehensive. "Yes, yes!" he replied. He sat down, leaning his body forward and said, "Third Mistress, thank you very much for your Huzhou's *zongzi*, they are really delicious."

The young madame said, "My deceased husband was surnamed Zhuang, I do not dare to be addressed as the Third Mistress. How long has Gui *Xianggong* been in the Palace?"

Wei Xiaobao thought, "In the dark a moment ago, there was a woman asking me if I killed Oboi. After I admitted that I killed him, they sent a servant girl to deliver *zongzi* for me to eat. Apparently I was betting my treasure correctly." He replied, "Not a lot more than a year."

Madame Zhuang said, "Could Gui *Xianggong* tell *Xiao Nuzi*[68] how you kill that traitor Oboi with your own hand?"

Hearing she was calling Oboi a 'traitor', Wei Xiaobao was even

more relieved, it was as if he had obtained a pair of very valuable cards in his hands, no matter of what value were the other two cards, when the cards were played, he would only make a kill and not pay for a loss, at most he would be even with the opponent. Thereupon he started by how Kangxi had issued an order for Oboi's capture, how Oboi resisted arrest, how the little eunuchs swarmed on him, but several of them were killed by Oboi, how he had used the ashes of the incense burner to blind him so that finally Oboi was captured. Only about Kangxi stabbing Oboi on the back, he changed it into catching Oboi by surprise, he himself ferociously stabbed him on the back.

Madame Zhuang did not utter a single word, she was listening attentively in silence. When Wei Xiaobao narrated how he blinded Oboi by scattering ashes from the incense burner, how he stabbed him on his back using a dagger, how he smashed his head using the copper incense burner and thus capturing him, she could not help but letting out a breath gently.

Wei Xiaobao was accustomed to listen to the storyteller performing their art; he knew where to pause and where to raise his voice, his technique in grasping the audience’s heart was just perfect. Moreover, it was his own personal experience, he knew all kinds of the minute details so that his narration was exhaustive. Plus he added some grease, salt, paste and vinegar, so that perhaps listening to his story was several degrees more soul-stirring than when he was actually capturing Oboi.

“So that’s what happened,” Madame Zhuang said, “The rumor outside is highly exaggerated, they say that Gui Gonggong has such an excellent martial art, that he fiercely fought Oboi for three hundred rounds, and that he used his unique skill to subdue him. Thinking that Oboi had the reputation as the Manchurian’s Number One Warrior, Gui *Xianggong* must have had very high martial art skill, while his age is still very young.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “If we fought for real, even a hundred Xiao Guizi are not this traitor’s match.”

“Afterwards, how did Oboi die?” Madame Zhuang asked.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “Eight or nine out of ten, this Third Mistress is not a female ghost; therefore, she must be a Wulin character. If I don’t need to lie, I should not tell a lie, so that after painstakingly win some money, I won’t lose it all in one turn of the cards.” Thereupon he truthfully told her in details how Kangxi sent him to inspect Oboi’s condition, how he came across Tian Di Hui people who came to attack the Prince Kang’s mansion, how the incoming people mistakenly identified him as Oboi’s man, how he struggled to crawl into the prison cell and thus killed Oboi. At the very last he said, “It turned out that these people were Oboi’s adversary; they were the heroes and warriors of the Green Wood Hall of Tian Di Hui. Seeing I killed Oboi, unexpectedly they were very polite to me, telling me that I have avenged their great enmity.”

Madame Zhuang nodded; she said, “And thus Gui *Xianggong* received the favor of Chen *Zongduozhu* who took you as his disciple and made you the Tian Di Hui’s Green Wood Hall *Xiangzhu*. Turns out everything is because of this.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “You already knew everything, why did you ask me, then?” He said, “I am a muddle head, I don’t know anything. Being the Green Wood Hall *Xiangzhu*, indeed I only have a name but no reality.” He did not know whether Madame Zhuang was a friend or a foe of Tian Di Hui, therefore, he decided to hold two contradictory views at the same time first and talk about it later.

Madame Zhuang pondered deeply for half a day before saying, “When Gui *Xianggong* killed Oboi in that prison cell, which move did you use? Is it possible for you to show it to me?”

Seeing her eyes were shining bright, Wei Xiaobao thought,

“This woman must belong to some demonic school; if I talk nonsense and toot my horn, most probably she would expose my trickery. I think being honest is the best.” Thereupon he stood up and said, “What fart move do I have?” Flailing his hands around he said, “At that time I was so scared out of my wits, I was in a hideous mess; this is exactly what I did.”

Madame Zhuang nodded. “Gui *Xianggong*, please sit down,” she said. And then she stood up and turned to Shuang’er, “Shuang’er, why don’t you take our osmanthus flower flavored candy and have Gui *Xianggong* taste it?” Finished speaking, she bowed in respect again and walked out toward the inner hall.

Wei Xiaobao thought, “She invites me to eat some candy, obviously she does not harbor any evil intention.” But in the end he still did not feel at ease; he thought, “Although this Third Mistress does not look like a female ghost, it is perhaps because her magical skill is so high that the demonic air did not show.”

Shuang’er returned from the inner hall, holding a blue and white china plate with tall legs with both hands, the plate was full of osmanthus flower flavored candy and pine-nut candy. She smiled and said, “Gui *Xianggong*, please eat some candy.” After setting the china plate on the table, she went back into the inner hall.

Sitting in that reception room, Wei Xiaobao ate quite a lot of osmanthus flower flavored candies and pine-nut candies, hoping that it would be dawn quickly.

After quite a while, suddenly he heard the rustling noise of clothes. Behind the door, by the window, behind the partition screen, there were a lot of eyes secretly stealing a glance at him; it appeared that all those eyes belong to women. In the dark night, it was difficult to tell whether they were humans or ghosts, it’s just that by looking at those eyes, Wei Xiaobao’s heart was really afraid. Suddenly he heard an old woman’s

voice from outside the long window said, “Gui *Xianggong*, you have killed the traitor Oboi, and have avenged the blood enmity as-deep-as-the-ocean of our families. We do not know how to repay this great virtue and great kindness.” The long window opened, revealing several dozens of women wearing white clothing lining up on the floor to pay homage to him.

Wei Xiaobao was startled; he quickly returned the courtesy. Hearing the women were knocking their heads on the floor, ‘dong, dong, dong’, he also kneeled down and kowtowed. The long window suddenly closed. The old woman said, “Benefactor does not need to be overly courteous, we, widows, do not dare to accept the honor.” Suddenly the women outside the long window raised their voices in sobbing and weeping.

Wei Xiaobao was absolutely terrified. After a while, the sound of weeping gradually went away, those women had dispersed. It was as if he was in a dream, or it happened only in his imagination. “Actually, are they humans, or are they ghosts? It looks like … it looks like …”

A moment later, Madame Zhuang returned from the inner hall. “Gui *Xianggong*,” she said, “Please do not be disturbed. Those who live here are all surviving family of the deceased loyal ministers and patriots who were harmed by Oboi. When we found out that Gui *Xianggong* has killed Oboi with your own hand, and thus avenging our great enmity, we all feel grateful.”

“So Third Master was … was also harmed by Oboi?” Wei Xiaobao said.

Lowering her head, Madame Zhuang said, “Precisely. Everybody in here is grieving and crying blood, day and night we are waiting for an opportunity to revenge. Who would have thought this traitor, who was strung through and filled with evil, faced the retribution that quickly, unexpectedly he died under Gui *Xianggong*’s hands.”

“What merit do I have?” Wei Xiaobao said, “It was only a coincident; nothing more than that.”

Shuang’er appeared with his own bundle and placed it on the table. Madame Zhuang said, “Gui *Xianggong*, your great virtue and great kindness is difficult to repay, by right we should receive you cordially, it’s only proper. Only, living as widows, we feel it is rather inappropriate. After careful discussion, we wanted to present you a meager gift to show our appreciation. But Gui *Xianggong*’s traveling bag is plentiful, you carry a huge sum of money. We live in the countryside, what do we have that Gui Xianggong may appreciate? As for martial art skill and so on, Gui *Xianggong* is Tian Di Hui’s Chen *Zongduozhu*’s disciple; your school’s martial art is far above our little superficial skill. It truly poses difficulties for us.”

Hearing her speaking so courteously, Wei Xiaobao said, “There is no need to stand on ceremonies. I just want to ask, those several companions of mine, where did they go?”

Madame Zhuang contemplated for half a day, and said, “Since you ask, I should have not dared not to answer. But after Benefactor learns about it, I am afraid it would only bring harm and not benefit. These several people are Benefactor’s friends, we will strive to do our best not to let them come into any harm. Someday they may see Benefactor again.”

Wei Xiaobao expected that asking further would be useless. He looked up toward the window and thought, “Why isn’t it daylight already?”

Madame Zhuang seemingly understood his thought; she asked, “Where is Benefactor going tomorrow?”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “I believe she has heard my conversation with that Zhang Laosan, it will be useless to conceal it from her.” He said, “I am going to Mount Wutai in Shanxi.”

Madame Zhuang said, “In this journey to Mount Wutai, you will have to travel far away; I am afraid you will meet some disturbances along the way. We are thinking of presenting you with a gift, we would ask that you give us the good fortune of not declining it.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed, “Other people have the good intention of giving me anything, I have never refused to accept it,” he said.

“That’s wonderful,” Madame Zhuang said. Pointing toward Shuang’er she said, “This little girl Shuang’er has followed me for many years, the way she is doing her job is fairly appropriate. We are presenting her to Benefactor, please take her with you. Hereafter she will attend to Benefactor.”

Wei Xiaobao was startled, but delighted; he did not expect that the gift she was going to present to him was a person. Just now Shuang’er had taken care of him, ironing his clothes and plaited his braid, she had saved him not a few efforts. If he could have this kind of good-looking and smart servant girl[69] accompanying him by his side, certainly it would be merrier; but the journey to Mount Wutai this time would not be necessarily peaceful or without any trouble, he must act according to the situation, taking a servant girl along would be very inconvenient. He said, “Madame Zhuang is giving me this valuable present, I am really grateful. It’s just that … it’s just that …” He wanted to decline, but first, others were giving him present, how could he not accept? Second, such a nice servant, he really did not want not to accept her. He saw Shuang’er, with her head hung low, was stealing a glance to him; as soon as their eyes met, she hastily turned her head around, her face blushed.

“I wonder what Benefactor’s difficulty is?” Madame Zhuang asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “I am going to Mount Wutai on a mission, most likely it will … it will not be easy; if I take this Miss along, I am afraid it will be inconvenient.”

“You don’t have to worry actually,” Madame Zhuang said, “Although Shuang’er is young, she is rather agile, she won’t be Benefactor’s burden. Please set your heart at ease.”

Wei Xiaobao took another glance toward Shuang’er, he saw her glazed eyes had an earnest look; he laughed and asked, “Shuang’er, are you willing to come with me?”

Shuang’er lowered her head, in a quiet voice she said, “Third Mistress ordered me to take care of *Xianggong*, naturally … naturally I must obey Third Mistress’ instruction.”

“Are you yourself willing or not?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “I am afraid we will meet dangers.”

“I am not afraid of dangers,” Shuang’er replied.

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, “You answered my second question, but did not answer my first. You are not afraid of dangers, it’s just that Madame is presenting you to me, but in your heart you are not willing.”

Shuang’er said, “Madame’s benevolence to me is very heavy, *Xianggong* has shown great kindness to our Zhuang family, Madame instructs me to attend *Xianggong*, I will definitely do it with all my heart. If *Xianggong* treats me well, my fate is good, if you do not treat me well, it’s my … my destiny to suffer hardship.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and said, “Your fate is very good, how can you be destined to suffer hardship?” The corner of Shuang’er’s mouth revealed a light smile.

“Shuang’er,” Madame Zhuang said, “You pay respect to Gui *Xianggong*; later on, you will become Gui *Xianggong*’s.”

Shuang’er looked up; suddenly her eyes turned red. First she

kneeled in front of Madame Zhuang and kowtowed, saying, “Third Mistress, I … I …” After saying the word ‘I’ twice, she broke into a light sob.

Madame Zhuang gently stroked her hair, in a warm voice she said, “Gui *Xianggong* is a young hero. He is still young, yet his name has spread all over the world. You must serve *Xianggong* well. He has promised to treat you well.”

“Yes,” Shuang’er replied. She turned around, and then gracefully paid her respect to Wei Xiaobao.

“No formalities, please!” Wei Xiaobao said. He helped her up, opened his bundle, took out a strand of pearls and said with a laugh, “Just consider this as my gift on the first meeting!” while thinking, “This strand of pearls at least worth three, four thousand *taels* of silver. If used to buy servant girls, it can buy several dozens of them. But several dozens of servant girls added together won’t be more lovely than this Shuang’er.”

Shuang’er received the gift with both hands, saying, “Many thanks *Xianggong*,” and hanged it on her neck. The pearls flickered under the light, it shined on her smart face, making her look even more beautiful.

Madame Zhuang said, “Benefactor is going to Mount Wutai, I wonder if you are going to investigate openly, or make secret inquiries?”

“Naturally I will make secret inquiries,” Wei Xiaobao replied.

Madame Zhuang said, “The various Buddhist monasteries and temples on Mount Wutai are separated into green and yellow, they are full of crouching tigers and hidden dragons. Benefactor must be very careful.”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “Thank you very much for your advice. But your calling me ‘Benefactor’, I do not dare to accept. Just call me Xiaobao.”

“I do not dare,” Madame Zhuang said. Standing up, she said, “Please take good care of yourself along the way, forgive this widow for not sending you far off.” To Shuang’er she said, “Shuang’er, as soon as you leave this door, you don’t belong to Zhuang family anymore. Hereafter whatever you say, whatever you do, will not be your former master’s concern. If you fool around outside, our Zhuang family will not shelter you anymore.” While saying these words, her expression was very serious. Shuang’er complied. Madame Zhuang saluted Wei Xiaobao again, and then walked in.

They saw the window paper turned translucent, the sky gradually brightened. Shuang’er went in to get her bundle, and then along with Wei Xiaobao’s bundle, she slung both bundles over her shoulder. “Let’s go!” Wei Xiaobao said.

“Yes!” Shuang’er replied. Her head hung low, her expression mournful, she kept looking back toward the hall. Apparently she was rather reluctant to part with Madame Zhuang. Her eyes were red, obviously she had just been crying.

Wei Xiaobao went out the front gate, Shuang’er followed behind him. By this time the heavy rain had stopped, but in the mountain streams, water was flowing rapidly, they could hear the sound of water everywhere. After walking for several dozen steps, Wei Xiaobao looked back toward the big house, but the mist had shrouded the front corner of the wall. After walking for several more dozen steps, he looked back again only to see white expanse of mist, nothing else was visible.

He sighed and said, “The matter of last night was really like a dream. Shuang’er, what did the Madame mean when she said those last sentences to you?”

Shuang’er said, “The Third Mistress said that later on I am serving *Xianggong*; no matter what I say or do, it won’t be the responsibility of her Zhuang family.”

“In that case,” Wei Xiaobao said, “You can tell me where did my companions go?”

Shuang’er was startled. “Yes,” she said, “*Xianggong*’s companions were originally saved by us, Zhang *Laosan* and his men were also originally captured by us. But afterward some formidable characters from Shen Long Jiao arrived and those prisoners were snatched away. Third Mistress said that we are womenfolk, it was inappropriate for us to fight with those uncouth men. Besides, we may not necessarily be able to overcome those men. For the time being, we submit to them while looking for another way to rescue your several companions. Seeing we retreated, Shen Long Jiao people also withdrew. Before leaving, they spoke several polite words.” Wei Xiaobao nodded; he was rather concerned over Fang Yi and Mu Jianping’s safety.

Shuang’er said, “Third Mistress has persuaded the Shen Long Jiao leader that they must not harm your several companions’ lives. The man has agreed to it with his own mouth.”

Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, “I am afraid those Shen Long Jiao fellows speak just like they fart. Ay, I guess it can’t be helped.” He then asked, “Does the Third Mistress know martial art?”

“She does,” Shuang’er said, “Not only she knows martial art, she is very good at it.”

Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, “She is such a horn-tooter, what ‘very good at martial art’? If she is really good at martial art, how could she let Oboi killed the Third Master?”

Shuang’er said, “When the Old Master and the Third Master were executed, none of their several dozen family members knew martial art. All the men in the family were arrested by Oboi and taken to Beijing to be executed, the women were to be banished to Guta district of Liaoning, to be slaves to the

armored troops. Fortunately along the way they met the saving star, who killed the prisoner escorts and saved our several dozen women, helped us settled in here, and taught the Third Mistress and the others some skill." Wei Xiaobao gradually understood.

In the meantime, the sky had brightened considerably, the sun had appeared on the eastern horizon. The heavy rain last night had washed the trees of the forest that everything looked fresh and green, with droplets of water hanging from their leaves. It was only now that Wei Xiaobao no longer doubted that the ones he saw last night were not female ghosts. He asked, "You have so many mourning halls in your house; are those all for your Masters and Young Masters who were killed by Oboi?"

"Exactly," Shuang'er said, "We live in seclusion deep in the mountains, we have never had any dealings with outsiders before. The neighboring country people are curious and come over to stick their heads out and look around, so we always masquerade ourselves as ghosts to scare them off. Therefore, everybody says this is a haunted house. Over the last year, nobody has ever dared to come over. Unexpectedly *Xianggong* came last night. Third Mistress said that now that our great enmity has been avenged, it would be best if everything is kept in secret. The names of Master, Young Master and the others are written on memorial tablets in the mourning hall, if outsiders saw it, it would be greatly inconvenient. When Xianggong asked me last night, I did not dare to explain. But Third Mistress has said that henceforth I am to serve *Xianggong*, and no longer the Zhuang family's responsibility. Naturally I must not conceal anything from you anymore."

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao delightedly said, "Let me tell you: my real name is Wei Xiaobao. That Gui Gonggong or what have you, is a fake name. You belong to the Wei family, not the Gui

family.”

Shuang’er was overjoyed; she said, “*Xianggong* even tell me your real name, I can’t possibly reveal it to anybody else.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed. “My real name is not such a big secret,” he said, “Many of Tian Di Hui brethrens already know about it.”

Shuang’er said, “When those Shen Long Jiao people fought with your companions, Third Mistress and the others were outside, enjoying watching the fun. They saw those people were able to chant spells, reciting mumbo-jumbo incantation …”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Hong Jiaozhu’s magical power is extensive, his long-life is the same as the Heaven's. This kind of incantation, I am also able to recite.”

Shuang’er said, “Third Mistress said that while their mouths were chanting the incantations, there must be some other magic going on in the dark; otherwise, it’s impossible that as soon as they recite the spell, their power increased several folds. Afterwards, when that Zhang *Laosan* was talking to you, Third Mistress was listening outside, while the rest of us extinguished the light in the main hall and caught everybody using fishing net.”

Wei Xiaobao slapped his thigh and exclaimed, “Wonderful! Catching people using fishing net? That’s great!”

Shuang’er said, “Third Mistress said that there is nothing special about that Zhang *Laosan*’s martial art skill, only his sorcery is formidable, thereupon she did not fight him face to face. As soon as she managed to lure him out, she extinguished the light and with the fishing net …”

“Caught the old turtle,” Wei Xiaobao finished.

Shuang’er giggled. She said, “There is a lake behind the mountain, we often went fishing at night. When we were in Huzhou, the big house of the Zhuang family was located near

Taihu[70]. The lake is very big, at that time our Zhuang family owned a lot of fishing boat, which we rented to the fishermen to catch fish. Third Mistress and the others learned how to use net to catch fish from watching the fishermen.”

“You really are Huzhou people, no wonder your Huzhou’s *zongzi* is really delicious,” Wei Xiaobao said, “How did the Third Master get killed by Oboi?”

“According to the Third Mistress,” Shuang’er said, “It was called ‘literary inquisition’.”

“Mosquito meat[71]?” Wei Xiaobao was puzzled, “Mosquito has meat?”

“Not ‘mosquito’, it’s ‘literary’,” Shuang’er said, "Learn to write! Our First Young Master was a scholar, his knowledge was very profound. After he'd gone blind, he wrote a book, in his book there was a sentence scolding the Manchu people ..."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," Wei Xiaobao clucked his tongue, "Amazing, he was blind yet was able to write a literary work. My eyes are not blind, yet when looking at other people's writing, I still do not know anything. This might be called 'bright-eyed blind person'!"

Shuang'er said, "Old Mistress often said that we live in a wrong era, being illiterate is actually better. The women who live together in our house are from several different families, each family's *Laoye* [Old Master], *Shaoye* [Young Master] were all gifted scholars and intellects, none of their literary works was not renowned in the world, yet each one ran into misfortune. It was precisely because of their literary works that disaster came. But Third Mistress said the more the Manchurian Tatars did not want us, Han people to study and create literary works, the more reason for us to study, the more reason for us to create literary works; only then will we prevent the Tatars from achieving their hearts' desire."

"Can you create literary works?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Shuang'er giggled and said, "*Xianggong* really loves to joke. How can a little servant girl create literary works? The Third Mistress taught me to read, yet I have read only seven or eight books."

"Wow!" Wei Xiaobao said, "You have read seven or eight books? That's a lot more than I can read. I only know seven or eight characters."

Shuang'er laughed and said, "*Xianggong* does not like to study, I am sure the Old Mistress would have loved you. She said that as soon as the Qing Dynasty arrived, only prodigal sons study."

"That's true!" Wei Xiaobao said, "I think that that thief Oboi was not too literate. It must be those bootlickers who read to him."

"Right!" Shuang'er said, "The book our First Young Master wrote was called something like 'History of the Ming Dynasty'. There were some words in the book scolding the Manchurian Qing. There was an evil man called Wu Zhirong who took the book to Oboi and lodged an accusation. This matter was blown out of proportion; several hundred people were executed; even the business proprietors who sold the book, the customers who bought the book, were all arrested and executed. *Xianggong*, you live in Beijing, have you met this man Wu Zhirong?"

"I have not," Wei Xiaobao replied, "I will slowly look for him, I am sure I will find him. Shuang'er, I am thinking of replacing you with someone else."

Shuang'er was shocked. "You ... you want to give me to someone else?" she said with trembling voice.

"Not giving you to someone else," Wei Xiaobao said, "I want to replace you with someone else."

Shuang'er's eyes had already turned red; she was about to cry. "What ... what do you mean replacing me with someone else?" she asked.

"Your Third Mistress gave you to me," Wei Xiaobao said, "Such a big gift is not easy to repay. I am thinking of catching that thief Wu Zhirong and give him to your Third Mistress. Then my gift will have more or less the same value as her gift."

Shuang'er laughed through her tears; she gently patted her own chest and said, "You scared me big time; I thought *Xianggong* did not want me anymore."

Wei Xiaobao was very happy; he said, "You were afraid I did not want you and became anxious like that. Don't worry, even if people pile a mountain of gold, a mountain of silver, a mountain of pearls, a mountain of gems, I will never trade you off."

While chatting, the two of them had reached the foot of the mountain. They saw the clear blue sky as if it had just been washed; there was not a single speck of dust within ten thousand *li*. Wei Xiaobao thought that the circumstances right now was entirely different from last night, where they were forced by the heavy rain to take shelter in the 'haunted house'. It's just that Xu Tianchuan, Fang Yi, Mu Jianping and the others lost the battle and were captured by the enemy; he did not know whether they would be able to escape from danger. Based on his own ability, he would not be able to save them anyway, so thinking about them would be useless, it would be better for him not to think.

After walking for several *li*, they arrived at a small town. The two of them found a noodle shop, so they went in to eat. After Wei Xiaobao had been seated, Shuang'er stood behind him, ready to serve.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "You can't be too polite, sit down, let's eat together."

"It won't do," Shuang'er replied, "How can I sit and eat together with *Xianggong*? There is no such custom."

"Why should I care about damn custom or no custom?" Wei Xiaobao said, "When I say you can, then you can. If you wait until I finish eating before you start, we would be delayed too much."

"We'll leave as soon as Xianggong finish eating," Shuang'er said, "I'll buy some *mantou* [steamed bun], and eat it while we are walking. That way there won't be any delay."

Wei Xiaobao sighed. "I have a strange temperament," he said, "If I eat something alone, my stomach will definitely give me some trouble. If nobody accompanies me eating, a moment later I will have tummy ache, and then I'll have to accept my fate."

Shuang'er smiled sweetly; she had no choice but to pull the bench and sat down at an oblique angle from Wei Xiaobao at the corner of the table.

[Translator's note: my original online source was the 2nd Edition, while I also have the hard copy of the 3rd Edition. The following part about the three lamas does not exist in the 3rd Edition, but since I have translated this part anyway, I am including it here.]

Wei Xiaobao had only eaten several chopsticks from his bowl of noodles when he saw three Tibetan Lama entering the shop and sat facing the street. They repeatedly called out, "Bring out the noodles, bring out the noodles!"

One of the lamas' glance caught the string of pearls on Shuang'er's neck, he nudged his companion with his left elbow and pouted to hint toward the pearls. As soon as the other two saw it, a happy expression appeared on their faces; they could not take their eyes off the necklace, sizing it up.

"Not good," Wei Xiaobao mused, "These three fellows are going to rob us on the way." Taking out a piece of silver, he ordered the noodle shop waiter to hire a large carriage. After finishing his noodles in haste, he boarded the carriage, and ordered the driver to hurry to the west.

After galloping for several *li*, they heard the sound of hoof beat behind the carriage. Wei Xiaobao looked back, and sure enough, he saw those three lamas on horseback, coming to pursue them. He said to Shuang'er, "Those three bandits are going to snatch your pearls away. Just give it to them, I'll buy another string for you later."

"Yes!" Shuang'er said, "You don't need to buy another one for me."

They heard the three lamas called out, "Stop! Stop!" The driver pulled the reins of his mule. The three lamas leaped forward to block the carriage. One of them said, "You, two babies, get out!"

Shuang'er took the pearls necklace from her neck and held it outside the carriage; she said, "You fancy this string of pearls, *Xianggong* says you can have it, just get it."

A big and fat lama stretched out his big hand, but he did not take the pearls, he reached farther up and grabbed Shuang'er's wrist and pulled her outside. Wei Xiaobao anxiously said, "You want more money, I have some. Don't play rough!" But he saw a yellow shadow flashed, the lama leaped up to the air and flew backward. "Good skill!" Wei Xiaobao shouted in his heart. He saw the lama's body rapidly fall to the ground, but his head was down and his feet up. 'Splosh!' his big and fat head went straight into a swamp, all the way to his chest, his legs were kicking wildly.

Wei Xiaobao was pleasantly surprised; he wondered what kind of prominent martial art move this lama was executing. 'Wah!

Wah!' the other two lamas were shouting randomly, while rushing forward to grab his body and pull him out of the mud. The fat lama's face was wet with mud; he was in such a sorry condition. Fortunately the heavy rain the previous night had soaked the dirt of the roadside swamp so that the lama was not injured.

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and told the carriage driver, "Quickly go!"

Shuang'er raised the pearls in her hand and asked, "*Xianggong*, shall I give these pearls to them?"

Before Wei Xiaobao could reply, he saw the three lamas drew their sabers from their waists and ferociously charged toward them. Shuang'er snatched the whip from the driver's hand and flicked it outward, it coiled around the saber in a lama's hand. She pulled the whip back and caught the saber with her left hand. She flicked the whip in her right hand again, and the saber in the second lama's hand was snatched away.

"Aiyo!" the third lama cried out, and stopped dead in his track. Shuang'er flicked her whip again, but this time it coiled around the lama's neck. She pulled him toward the carriage, and then without any trouble snatched the saber in the lama's hand.

The lama's throat was strangled by the whip, his eyes turned white, his tongue was stretched out, his face was instantly devoid of any blood. The other two lamas rushed toward Shuang'er in converging attack from left and right, trying to save their companion. Shuang'er leaped up, her left foot stood on the axle of the carriage, her right foot repeatedly kicked, the acupoints on the two lamas' heads were sealed, they passed out and fell to the ground. She waved her hand to loosen up the whip. The lama had been suffocated for a good while, he also lost his consciousness and fell down.

Wei Xiaobao was extremely delighted; he sprang up and called

out, "Shuang'er, good Shuang'er, turns out your martial art skill is superb."

Shuang'er showed a faint smile and said, "It was nothing, these three bandits are useless."

"If I had known earlier, I would not have to worry for half a day," Wei Xiaobao said. Jumping down from the carriage, he kicked the body of a lama. "What do you want?" he asked. But the lama was still fainted and had not regained his consciousness.

Shuang'er kicked his waist. The lama groaned and regained his consciousness. Shuang'er said, "*Xianggong* asks what do you want?"

"Miss ..." the lama said, "Miss can do ... do magic?"

Shuang'er smiled. "Answer quickly!" she said, "What are you up to?"

The lama said, "We ... we are lamas from Mount Wutai's Bodhisattva Peak ... Great Manjushri Temple."

Shuang'er frowned. "What lama or not lama?" she said, "Rubbish! You are speaking vulgar language."

"Lamas are Buddhist monks of Tibet," Wei Xiaobao explained.

"Turns out you are Buddhist monks," Shuang'er said. She gently kicked the lama again and said, "If you are Buddhist monks, how come you do not shave your whole head clean?"

"We are lamas," the lama said, "Not Buddhist monks."

"What?" Shuang'er said, "Still won't admit it? *Xianggong* says you are Buddhist monks, then you are Buddhist monks!" She kicked the 'tian huo' [heavenly opening] acupoint on his waist, the lama felt the pain went straight into his bones and marrow; he could not bear it and shouting and screaming in loud voice. The pain grew worse, and his shout grew louder.

The other two lamas slowly regained their consciousness, hearing their companion was screaming like a pig being slaughtered, they were aghast and immediately asked in Tibetan what had happened. The other lama replied, and then called out in Chinese, "I am a Buddhist monk, I am a Buddhist monk. I am whatever Miss ... Miss said what I am. Please ... please quickly ... unseal my acupoint."

Shuang'er laughed. "Whatever Miss says does not count, it's whatever *Xianggong* says that count," she said, "*Xianggong*, what do you say he is?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed. "I say he is a Buddhist nun!" he said.

The lama really could not bear the pain, he hastily said, "I am a Buddhist nun, I am a Buddhist nun!" Wei Xiaobao and Shuang'er roared in laughter.

Shuang'er lightly kicked the 'qi hu' [*chi* door] acupoint on his neck with her left foot, the severe pain stopped immediately. But the lama was still screaming, "I am a Buddhist nun, I am a Buddhist nun!"

Wei Xiaobao stopped laughing. He said, "You are people who have left home, why did you want to rob our belongings?"

"*Xiaoren* deserves to die," the lama replied, "Next time we won't dare to do it again."

"You are still thinking of next time?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

The lama said, "I said we won't dare, we really won't dare. Even after a hundred years have passed, we still won't dare."

Wei Xiaobao said, "You do not chant Buddhist scripture in the temple, but coming down the mountain instead. What are you up to?"

The lama replied, "It's ... it's Shifu who sends us down the mountain."

"Your Shifu sends you down the mountain to rob gold, silver and jewels?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"No ... not that," the lama replied, "We are going to Beijing ..." he had just spoken to this point, the other big and fat lama coughed.

Wei Xiaobao cast a glance toward him, he saw that fat lama repeatedly winked his eyes, obviously he was signaling his companion not to tell the truth. At first Wei Xiaobao was thinking that these lamas were provoking evil designs upon seeing riches, robbing and plundering, but doing nothing serious. Manchurians believed in lamas; whenever there was a religious ritual to be performed in the Palace, they would always invite lamas to chant the sutras. If the imperial household was like that, the princes and dukes and other royalties need not be mentioned. Therefore, quite a number of lamas, who did not need to observe the Qing law, went on the rampage in Beijing. Wei Xiaobao was thinking of torturing these lamas for a while, and after he had enough fun, he would simply let them go. However, seeing the big fat lama's expression, he knew there was something else going on. He said, "These three fellows are playing tricks. Shuang'er, give each one a kick, let these three people whine on for days, and then we are off!"

"Yes!" Shuang'er complied. She could also see that the big fat lama was playing tricks, hence she kicked him first on his 'tian huo' acupoint. The lama immediately screamed.

Shuang'er walked over to the first lama and lifted her foot as if she was going to kick. The lama was shocked; he hastily said, "Don't kick, I'll tell you everything. Shifu sends us to Beijing to deliver a letter."

"What letter?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

The lama said, "This ... we can't let you see this letter. If we show it to other people, Shi ... Shifu will definitely kill us."

"Take it out!" Wei Xiaobao said, "If you don't, I'll kick you." While saying that, he took a step forward.

The lama did not know that Wei Xiaobao's martial art skill was limited, if he was kicked, the pain would be the same as if he was tickled. Seeing Wei Xiaobao lifting up his foot, he busily said, "I don't ... I don't have it with me."

"Take it out!" Wei Xiaobao said.

The lama had no choice, he went over to the fat lama and mumbled some Tibetan words. The fat lama also used Tibetan to reply; while squealing like a slaughtered pig, he appeared to be shouting some disjointed Tibetan words so that his voice was even more unpleasant to the ears. From the tone of his voice and his expression, Wei Xiaobao deduced that the fat lama did not allow the other lama to take the letter out. Thereupon he walked over to the fat lama and fiercely kicked the fat lama's forehead. The big and fat lama fainted instantly. The other lama then took a small oilcloth package from the fat lama's bosom, and trembling with fear, he presented the package with both hands.

Wei Xiaobao received the package. Shuang'er also took out a small package from her bosom and produced a tiny pair of scissors. She cut the package open, as expected, there was a letter inside. There were two lined of Tibetan script written on the envelope. "To whom is this letter addressed to?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"To our Shibo [older martial uncle]," the lama replied.

Wei Xiaobao reached out and 'rip!' he tore the envelope open. The two lamas groaned repeatedly. Wei Xiaobao saw several lines of curvy Tibetan script written on a sheet of yellow paper, on the bottom, drawn in cinnabar ink, there was a weird-looking seal, it was totally unintelligible. Even if this letter was written in Chinese script, Wei Xiaobao would not understand.

Thereupon he handed it over to Shuang'er and asked, "What does it say?"

Shuang'er did not know either; she turned to the lama, "*Xianggong* asks you: what does it say? Tell us quickly! If you speak half a word of lie, I will kick your acupoint immediately and never unseal it again. Humph, I will wait for at least three days and three nights before unsealing it."

The lama received the letter, looked at it over and over, and stammered, "This ... this is ..."

"What this or that?" Wei Xiaobao said, "Tell me quickly!"

"Yes, yes!" the lama replied, "The letter says, the person *Shixiong* was asking about ..." He had just spoken that sentence, the other lama suddenly mumbled some unintelligible words. Shuang'er leaped toward him and kicked him on the 'tian huo' acupoint. The lama's words turned into screaming and wailing.

The first lama's countenance changed greatly; with a trembling voice he said, "The letter says ... says that the person we are looking for, we can't find it even after searching high and low. He is definitely ... definitely not on Mount Wutai."

Wei Xiaobao saw the lama's eyes were evasive while repeatedly swallowing his own saliva as he was talking, he thought, "Although I don't understand your bird's cry or dog's bark, looking at your expression, I can tell that you are lying. It's just that this fellow is too stupid, even when telling a lie, he is not convincing." He said to Shuang'er, "This lama is lying to us."

Shuang'er said, "Since he is that bad, we can't spare him." She raised her foot and kicked his 'tian huo' acupoint.

The lama cried out, "You ... just kill me. My *Shixiong* said that ... that if we tell you what the letter says, we ... the three of us will not live. You ... you kill me quickly."

"Ignore him, let's go!" Wei Xiaobao said. Together with Shuang'er, they leaped onto the carriage.

The carriage driver saw that although these two were young, unexpectedly they were able to deal with the three lamas and made them hovering between life and death. He was full of admiration and did not stop praising them. Wei Xiaobao said in a low voice, "When we get to the small town ahead, you may need to change. This string of pearls must be kept someplace else."

[The 3rd Edition continues with the following:]

After the two of them finished eating the noodles, Wei Xiaobao said, "You are wearing women's clothes, a lot of people along the way will look at you because you are too pretty. When we get to the small town ahead, you may need to change. This string of pearls must be kept someplace else."

"Yes," Shuang'er said, "What attire must I change into?"

Wei Xiaobao smiled and said, "You change into a man's clothing."

After travelling for about thirty *li*, the carriage reached a big town. Wei Xiaobao sent the carriage driver off, while they entered an inn to lodge for the night. He took out some money and instructed Shuang'er to go buy some clothing. Shuang'er purchased several sets and returned to the inn; she put on the clothes and was transformed into a handsome young attendant.

With this transformation, they no longer attracted any attention along the way. Shuang'er was well-versed in martial art, but was completely oblivious of the ways of the world; all along the way, she left the decision making into Wei Xiaobao's hands, although his ideas were not always brilliant. Thirty percent of the time he was serious, the other seventy percent he was simply fooling around.

One day they arrived at the border between Hebei and Shanxi, two provinces. From Fuping County of Zhili provinces[72] to the west, over the Great Wall mountain range, they would reach the Long Quan [lit. dragon spring] Pass. This Long Quan Pass was actually the eastern gateway to Mount Wutai. The stony path was rugged, the ridges and peaks were high and steep. Upon entering Mount Wutai, the first temple they encountered was the Yong Quan Temple [lit. bubbling spring].

Wei Xiaobao inquired the whereabouts of the Qing Liang Temple, but Mount Wutai was actually very big, Qing Liang Temple was located between the Nan Tai Peak and Zhong Tai Peak [Translator's note: I am not familiar with Mount Wutai's geography, Nan Tai and Zhong Tai mean 'southern platform' and 'middle platform', respectively]. The distance from Yong Quan Temple was really not near.

That evening Wei Xiaobao and Shuang'er seek lodging at the Lu Family Village neighboring the Yong Quan Temple. They ate a bowl of mutton and bread soup and some candy. He recalled the cold demeanor of the Yong Quan Temple's monk when he was asking about the Qing Liang Temple's location earlier that day. When the monk saw how young he was, the monk did not pay him any attention; instead of explaining the location of the Qing Liang Temple, the monk asked him back, "The road is long and difficult to walk, what are you going to Qing Liang Temple for?" This nasty attitude was seventy-percent similar to the selfish, concerned-only-with-gaining-advantages-for-themselves, bald-headed thieves of the Chan Zhi Temple [lit. Dhyana Wisdom] in Yangzhou. It would not be easy to look for Emperor Shunzhi when he reached Qing Liang Temple later; he must find another way.

While his mouth was chewing the candy, his mind was churning, "They say money will make the devil turn millstones,

perhaps I can make the monks to turn the millstones as well. I once heard the storyteller told the story of Lu Zhishen of the 'Water Margin' went to Mount Wutai to become a monk. A certain outsider gave considerable alms to the Temple. Lu Zhishen created havoc in the Temple, drinking wine and eating dog meat, yet the old monk was not angry. That's right, I am going to pretend that I need to perform a Buddhist ceremony, scatter a large sum of money in the Temple, and then making an excuse to stay in the Temple and won't leave, and thus I can slowly looking for the old Emperor. The old monks can't possibly drive me away."

However, upon entering the mountain, other than the temples, they did not see any town where he could exchange a five-hundred-*tael* banknote. Without any choice they had to leave Long Quan Pass and returned to Fuping. He exchanged the banknote into silver currency, and then both he and Shuang'er changed into brand new clothes; he thought, "I want to perform a Buddhist ceremony, but I don't understand anything. I am afraid I'll give myself away in short moment. I should have some practice first."

Thereupon he went to a temple within the Fuping county city wall called the Jixiang Temple [lit. auspicious/lucky] and kowtowed several times in front of the Buddha image. The welcoming monk came out with a register book, writing brush and ink stone. Wei Xiaobao brushed him off and said, "Giving alms is giving alms, why do you need to write anything?" He took out a fifty-*tael* worth of *yuanbao* and handed it over to the monk. The monk was greatly surprised, thinking that this young benefactor was very generous, which was a rarity in the world. Immediately he thanked him repeatedly, invited him to the dining room and offered him vegetarian dishes and plain noodles.

When Wei Xiaobao was eating the noodles, the Abbot sat next

to him to keep him company, greatly praising his kind-heartedness and reverence, which would definitely receive the Bodhisattva's blessing; in the future Wei Xiaobao would definitely win top marks in the imperial examinations, to be a Zhuangyuan [see Chapter 1], his house would be full of children and grandchildren, he would enjoy boundless good fortune. Wei Xiaobao was secretly amused, musing that you have flattered me very well, I am totally illiterate, yet you say I would win top marks in the imperial examinations and be a Zhuangyuan; won't that mean you are cursing me on my face? He said, "Old Monk, I want to go to Mount Wutai to perform a big Buddhist ceremony, it's just that I do not know anything. I want you to give me advice."

Hearing the three characters 'big Buddhist ceremony', the Abbot stood up immediately and said, "*Shizhu* [benefactor], all temples under the heavens are dedicated to worship Buddha, the same Bodhisattva. If you want to perform a Buddhist ceremony, it would be better to do it in a small temple, which will cover everything you need thoroughly and properly; actually you don't need to painstakingly go up Mount Wutai."

Wei Xiaobao shook his head. "That won't do," he said, "This Buddhist ceremony is my cherished desire, I simply must perform it on Mount Wutai." While saying that, he took out another fifty-*tael* worth of *yuanbao* and said, "How about this: find someone for me to accompany me to Mount Wutai and be my helper. This fifty-*tael* is for him."

The old monk was greatly delighted. "That's easy, that's easy!" he said. He had a younger cousin[73] who was the caretaker of the temple property: collecting the rent and purchasing stuffs for the temple, everything was handled by him, but he was not a monk. Immediately the old monk summoned him and introduced him to Wei Xiaobao.

This man was surnamed Yu, given name single character Ba, a loud-mouthed man, but his nickname was 'One Less Stroke'. Actually, if a stroke (一) is added to the character Yu (于), it will become the character Wang (王), therefore, Yu Ba (于八) will change into Wang Ba (王八)[74]. In just a few words, Wei Xiaobao had already felt that he was a very congenial companion. Since he was little, Wei Xiaobao was used to hang around this kind of boorish man in the marketplace. This time suddenly he met one such man in Fuping County, he had the feeling like he had met an old friend far from home.

Wei Xiaobao consulted the Abbot again on various customs involved in performing Buddhist ceremony. The Abbot told him everything he knew, and he talked endlessly. Wei Xiaobao thought, "Buddhist monks' rules are indeed a lot!" He donated twenty more *taels*.

Taking Yu Ba along, Wei Xiaobao returned to the inn, took out some money, and sent him off to buy everything they need. With money in his hand, Yu Ba worked really fast; before long, he had returned with all his purchases. For himself, he bought a set of fresh and bright colored clothes. "Wei *Xianggong*," he said, "You are a rich man, now that I am your attendant, I should put on something with more style, don't you think? This set of clothes, shoes and hat is no more than three *taels* and five *qian*."

Wei Xiaobao thought he had a good point, thereupon he sent him off again to buy several sets of luxurious clothing for him and Shuang'er. With a lot of fanfare the three of them went out the Long Quan Pass, followed by eight porters, each carrying a shoulder pole laden with vegetarian food and gifts for Buddhist monks, travelled along the main road heading south.

Upon entering Mount Wutai, after walking for only several *li*, they had already seen a temple. After the Yong Quan Temple,

there was Jing Tai Lu [lit. scripture platform foothill] Temple, and then Shi Fo [lit. Buddha Rock] Temple, Pu Ji [lit. universal crossing] Temple, Gu Fo [lit. ancient Buddha] Temple, Jin Gang [lit. diamond, steel or Vajra - Buddha's warrior attendant] Warehouse, Bai Yun [lit. white cloud] Temple, Jin Deng [lit. golden lantern] Temple, and finally Ling Jing [lit. virtual environment] Temple.

That evening they spent the night at the Ling Jing Temple. At dawn the next day, they continued northbound until they reached Jin Ge [lit. golden pavilion] Temple, and then turned west for several *li*, and arrived at the Qing Liang Temple. This Qing Liang Temple was located at the peak of Qing Liang mountain. It was not more imposing compared to the other temples they saw along the way, the main gate to the monastery was shabby; obviously it was worn down by years of non-repair. Wei Xiaobao was rather disappointed, "When the Emperor left home to become a Buddhist monk, he must have chosen the biggest temple. I am afraid the old turtle Hai was just spouting nonsense, perhaps the old emperor became a monk not in this place."

Yu Ba entered the gate to inform the welcoming monk that a certain high official from Beijing by the surname of Wei had come to perform a Buddhist ceremony, to fast and to offer sacrificial offering to Buddha. Looking at the luxurious clothing this party of people wore, plus the eight shoulder poles of offering, the welcoming monk immediately invited them in and offered them some tea, while he went in to report to the Abbot.

The Abbot, old monk Cheng Guang [lit. clear light] came into the side room to meet Wei Xiaobao. He asked, "I wonder what kind of Buddhist ceremony Benefactor is going to perform?"

Seeing this Abbot Cheng Guang was very tall, but as thin as a stick, his eyes were half-closed, his overall appearance looked washed out, Wei Xiaobao was even more disappointed, he said,

"Disciple wants to perform a seven days and seven nights Buddhist ceremony on behalf of disciple's deceased father, as well as several deceased friends, so that they may be released from suffering."

Cheng Guang said, "There are many big temples within Beijing's city limit, temples on Mount Wutai are also numerous; I wonder why did Benefactor specifically travel so far away to Mount Wutai and go to a small temple to perform Buddhist ceremony?"

Wei Xiaobao had anticipated this question, hence he had already discussed it over with Yu Ba. He said, "My mother had a dream on the fifteenth of last month. In her dream she saw my deceased father, who told her that during his life he had committed grave sins, he said we must go to Qing Liang Temple on Mount Wutai, to ask *Fangzhang Dashi* [Great Master Abbot] to perform a seven days and seven nights repentance ritual to clear away the blood disaster so that my father in the underworld does not receive endless agony."

He did not know his own father, neither did he know if his father was still alive or had already died. When he said those words, he could not help feeling funny; he mused, "Damn it, you gave birth to *laozi*, and then washed your hand and did not care at all, you deserve to go to hell. Now *laozi* is giving you a seven days and seven nights Buddhist ceremony, it is your enormous good fortune."

"So that's how it is," Cheng Guang said, "Young Benefactor, the proverb said it well: the day has its thought, the night has its dream. The matter of the dream must never be taken seriously."

"*Da Heshang* [great monk]," Wei Xiaobao said, "The proverbs said it well: it is better to believe than disbelieve. Even if what my father said in the dream was not real, by performing a Buddhist ceremony on his behalf to release his soul from

suffering, we are performing a virtue. But if my father really did say those words, yet we do not do as he wished, in the underworld he is being bullied and tormented by the Ox-Head, Horse-Face and little demon Wuchang, that ... that ... won't I always feel a little bit bad? Besides, I am under my mother's order. Mother said that the old abbot of Qing Liang Temple of Mount Wutai has a destiny with her; this Buddhist ceremony must be performed in your precious temple." He mused, "You have a destiny with my Mama, this is preposterous! Have you ever been to the Lovely Spring Courtyard in Yangzhou to be my mother's customer?"

"Hey," Cheng Guang exclaimed, "Benefactor did not know this: my humble temple is of Zen Buddhism. This kind of repentance ritual is a Pure Land[75] Sects' matter, which we do not do. On this Mount Wutai, Jin Ge Temple, Pu Ji Temple, Da Fo Temple, Yan Qing Temple, and many more are of the Pure Land Sect. Benefactor is advised to go to one of those temples to perform the Buddhist ceremony."

Wei Xiaobao thought that in Fuping County, the Abbot was trying to seize the opportunity to perform the Buddhist ceremony, but here, this old monk had used all sorts of excuses trying to push away the money delivered into his gate with both hands; something strange was going on here. He asked over and over, but Cheng Guang did not budge. He stood up and said to the welcoming monk, "Show the Benefactor the way to Jin Ge Temple, *Lao Na*[***76***] keeps him company only for a moment."

Wei Xiaobao was anxious, he hastily said, "Since the Abbot insists on not giving me permission, I want to ask the great monks of your precious temple to receive the alms: the Buddhist robes, the monk hats, as well as the money I bring to your precious temple."

Cheng Guang put his palms together, "Many thanks," he said. Seeing eight shoulder poles of gifts Wei Xiaobao brought, unexpectedly he did not show the least bit of enthusiasm.

Wei Xiaobao said, “Mother instructed me to personally hand over each gift to the great monks of your precious monastery, even the monks helping with the fire and growing vegetable in the garden are to have a share. I bring altogether three hundred sets of gift, if it is not enough, we will go buy some more.”

Cheng Guang said, “Enough, it’s too much. Our temple has only fifty something people. Would Benefactor please leave only fifty or sixty sets? That would be enough.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Is it possible to ask the Abbot to summon the monks in the temple, so that I could personally hand over the gift? This is my mother’s wish; no matter what I must accomplish it.”

Cheng Guang raised his head, suddenly his eyes flashed like lightning, as he swept his gaze over Wei Xiaobao’s face. “Very well!” he said, “Our Buddha is merciful, let it be as the Benefactor wishes.” Turning around, he walked inside.

Looking at his bamboo-pole like back walking inside, Wei Xiaobao felt an unspeakably uncomfortable feeling in his heart. Awkwardly he lifted the tea cup into his mouth. Standing behind him, Yu Ba muttered in low voice, “In all his life, the one surnamed Yu has rarely seen this kind of unlucky old monk. No wonder in such a big temple like Qing Liang Temple, even the golden image of Bodhisattva is tattered.”

They heard the bell in the temple was struck, the welcoming monk said, “Please step into the western hall to give your alms.”

Wei Xiaobao went to the western hall; he saw the monks were streaming in. He handed over the gift one by one, while

attentively looking at each monk's face. He thought, "I have never seen the Emperor Shunzhi, but he is the young emperor's papa, their appearances must be somewhat similar. As long as I can find a monk that look like an older version of the young emperor, he must be it."

But after he finished handing over more than fifty sets of gifts, not only he did not see any 'older version of the young emperor', he could not find even a single monk with one or two part resemblance to the young emperor. Wei Xiaobao was very disappointed; but suddenly he remembered, "He was the Emperor; with his status, how could he come to accept alms like clothing and hats? This plan of mine is really stupid!" He asked the welcoming monk, "Have all monks in your precious temple come?"

The welcoming monk replied, "Everybody has received your alms, thank you very much for Benefactor's generosity."

"Everyone has received the gift?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "I am afraid it's not necessarily true, perhaps there are some people who are unwilling to come and get the gift."

"Benefactor is joking," the welcoming monk said, "How can there be such thing?"

"Those who have left home do not tell lies," Wei Xiaobao said, "If you deceive me, when you die, your tongue will be pulled out in hell." As soon as the welcoming monk heard that, his countenance changed. Wei Xiaobao said, "Since there are still some monks who have not received the gift, would great monk please invite him to receive it?"

The welcoming monk shook his head. "Only *Fangzhang Dashi* has not received the gift," he said, "I think we do not need to ask the Senior to come out again."

Right this moment, a monk hurriedly rushed in. "Shixiong," he said, "There are more than a dozen lamas outside wishing to

see the Abbot.” And then with a low voice he added, “They all carry weapons, and are rubbing their fists and palms; their purpose in coming is definitely not good.”

The welcoming monk frowned and said, “Like river water and well water, the green and yellow temples of Mount Wutai have never interfered with each other. What do they want, coming over here? Go and report to the Abbot, I am coming out to look." Finished speaking, he turned to Wei Xiaobao and said, "Excuse me," and then with quick steps he went out.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "I am afraid those stinky lamas are here for us." He thought Shuang'er's martial art skill was superior, a dozen or so lamas should not give them any problem. Suddenly he heard commotion from outside the gate, a group of people were crashing into the Hall of Great Strength[77]. Wei Xiaobao said, "Let us see the excitement." Pulling Shuang'er's hand, he went out together with her.

As they arrived at the main hall, they saw the welcoming monk was surrounded by a dozen or so yellow-robed lamas, who were shouting randomly and talking to him at once, "We must search; someone personally saw him coming to Qing Liang Temple." "You are in the wrong here, why do you hide people?" "Just hand him over to us nicely, we'll let this matter drop; otherwise, humph, humph!"

[*The following paragraph does not exist in the 3rd Edition, which makes sense, since Wei Xiaobao has never met any lamas before*:

Wei Xiaobao went into the main hall and stood with hands on his waist, thinking, "*Laozi* is here, go get your horse and get me." Who would have thought that those lamas ignored him completely; no one even cast a glance to him.]

Amidst the commotion, Abbot Cheng Guang walked in; he

asked slowly, "What's the matter?"

The welcoming monk said, "It's good for the Abbot to know, they ..."

As soon as the word 'Abbot' came out of his mouth, the lamas swarmed around Cheng Guang, shouting, "You are the Abbot? That's great!" "Quickly hand the man over! If not, your temple will be burned to the ground." "This is preposterous, really preposterous!" "Are you telling me that after you become a Buddhist monk, you throw reasons out the window?"

Cheng Guang asked, "May I ask, from which temple are numerous *Shixiong* coming from? You have honored our humble temple with your presence, I wonder what is the purpose of your visit?"

A lama wearing red kasaya over his yellow robe replied, "We came from Tibet, we come to the Central Plain on business under the order of the Living Buddha. Who knew that one of our young lama attendants was kidnapped by a wicked monk, and is hidden inside the Qing Liang Temple? Monk Abbot, quickly hand over our young lama; otherwise, we won't let this matter rest."

"That's very strange," Cheng Guang replied, "Our temple here is Zen Buddhism green temple, we usually do not have any association with Tibetan Tantra Buddhists. Why don't you inquire to the yellow temples everywhere about your missing young lama?"

The lama angrily said, "Someone saw it with his own eyes; that lama is in Qing Liang Temple. That was the reason we came here to inquire. Otherwise, do you think we have just eaten our rice until we are full and have nothing else to do, and thus we came here to make a scene? Decide it for yourself, if you hand over the young lama quickly, we will look at the monk's face or Buddha's face, we won't investigate this matter

further."

Cheng Guang shook his head and said, "Even if there was a young lama coming to Qing Liang Temple, and gentlemen did not come to inquire, *Lao Na* can't possibly hide him here."

Several lamas shouted together, "Let us search you temple then!"

Cheng Guang still shook his head, "This is Buddhist's peaceful place, how can I let people search around as they wish?"

The leader of the lamas said, "If you do not feel as guilty as a thief, why don't you let us search? Obviously the young lama is here, he is definitely in the Qing Liang Temple."

Cheng Guang shook his head. Two lamas reached out and grabbed him by the collar, shouting, "Will you or will you not let us search the temple?" Another lama said, "Could it be that there are women of good families hidden in the great monk's temple, hence you are afraid others might find out? Otherwise, what's the big deal of letting us search your temple?" By this time, about a dozen monks from Qing Liang Temple had come out, but they were blocked by the lamas so that they were unable to come near their Abbot.

[2nd Edition: In low voice Shuang'er asked, "Xianggong, shall I get rid of them?"

"Wait a moment!" Wei Xiaobao said.]

He [Wei Xiaobao] thought, "Clearly these lamas are here to make trouble without reason; how can this temple hide some young lama? Is it possible that their intention is the same as mine, they are also looking for Emperor Shunzhi?"

He saw a flash of white light, two lamas already had daggers in their hands, each pointing at Cheng Guang’s chest and back. With stern voice they said, “If you don’t allow us to search, we’ll kill you first.”

Cheng Guang's face did not show the smallest hint of fear. "Amitabha Buddha," he said, "We all are Buddha's disciples, why should you use force?"

The two lamas slightly pushed their daggers forward. "Great Monk," they shouted, "Please forgive our offense." Cheng Guang's body slipped sideways, carried by their own momentum, the two lamas' daggers were thrust into each other's chest. The two of them hastily stretched out their left palms to push into each other and hence they both withdrew several steps backward.

The rest of the people shouted, "Qing Liang Temple's Abbot assaults people! He commits murder!" In the middle of their shouts, from the main door rushed thirty, forty people; there were monks, lamas, and several lay people wearing long gowns. An old lama with white beard and wearing yellow robe shouted, "Did Qing Liang Temple's Abbot kill someone?"

Cheng Guang put his palms together, "Those who left home to be Buddhist monks use mercy as the guiding principle; how can they rashly violate the commandment against taking life? Shixiong, Benefactors, where did you come from?" To a fifty-something old monk he said, "Turns out Fo Guang Temple's Abbot Xinxi himself has honored us with his presence, and yet I did not come out far enough to welcome you. Please forgive my offense."

Fo Guang Temple was the oldest among big temples on Mount Wutai. It was constructed during the first Wei Emperor Xiao Wen, and was quite established for a long time. Local people had a saying, "First it was Fo Guang Temple, then there is Mount Wutai." Actually, Mount Wutai's original name was Mount Qing Liang [same Qing Liang as the temple's name], afterwards, with the discovery of the five major peaks, it was renamed Mount Wutai, but at that time, Fo Guang Temple had already been established. The name Mount Wutai was only changed

during the great undertaking of establishing the Sui Dynasty. Within the Buddhist community, Fo Guang Temple position was far above Qing Liang Temple, and thus Abbot Xinxi was the de facto leader of various green temples on Mount Wutai.

This monk was fat with big head and plump ears, his face was greasy and shiny; with a giggle he said, “Cheng Guang *Shixiong*, let me introduce you to two friends.” Pointing to the old lama, he said, “This is Great Lama Bayan *Fashi*[78], who has just arrived from Lhasa, Tibet, the one most doted on and trusted by the Seat of the Living Buddha, the Great Lama with most authority.”

Cheng Guang put his palms together and said, “Brought together by fate, I pay my respect to the Great Lama.” Bayan nodded, his manner was very arrogant.

Xinxi pointed to a man wearing dark green plain garment, a scholar of about thirty something, and said, “This is the famous scholar of Western Sichuan, Huangfu Ge, Mr. Huangfu.”

Huangfu Ge cupped his fist across his chest and said, “It’s an honor to meet Great Monk Cheng Guang, whose divine martial ability is well-known. Today I can see you, it is truly the good fortune of three lifetimes.”

Cheng Guang put his palms together and said, “The old monk is indeed very old, when I was little, I learned some tiny skill, but I have already forgotten about it completely. Huangfu Jushi[79] is quite established in both pen and sword, deserving my congratulations.”

Hearing these people were speaking politely to each other, Wei Xiaobao thought that the fight most probably would not happen; there would not be any excitement to watch, therefore, there would be less opportunity for him to fish in troubled water, an opportunity for him to look for the old

emperor. Inwardly, he was quite disappointed.

"Great Monk," Bayan said, "From Tibet I brought along a young disciple, but he is detained in your temple. Please look at the Living Buddha's golden face and release him; everybody will appreciate your kindness."

Cheng Guang showed a faint smile as he said, "These several Shixiong came to create trouble in my humble temple, *Lao Na* was not willing to lower myself to their level. *Dashi* is a fair and reasonable man, how could you also listen to rumor? Since Qing Liang Temple was established, perhaps today is the very first time we are honored with the lama masters' visit. Where did you hear that we have detained your precious temple's disciple?"

Bayan rolled his eyes, with a loud voice he barked, "Are you saying we accused you wrongly? You don't want to drink as a forfeit but take … take a toast." His Chinese was not too good, it was actually 'to refuse a toast only to be forced to drink a forfeit', but he said it backwards.

Xinxi laughed and said, "The two gentlemen must not harm the friendly relation. In *Lao Na*'s opinion, whether that young lama is in the Qing Liang Temple or not, speaking is cheap, the proof is in seeing. Let Huangfu Jushi and this impoverished monk be the witness, everybody can search around the Qing Liang Temple just this once. Seeing Buddha worship Buddha, meeting a monk nodding to the monk; each place, each monk will see it himself, if the young lama is still cannot be found, won't that mean we don't have any problem anymore?" Speaking back and forth, in the end he still wanted to do a search of the Qing Liang Temple.

A displeased expression flashed on Cheng Guang's face. He said, "These lama masters came from Tibet, no wonder they do not understand our Han people's custom. Xinxi *Dashi* is a person of virtue and prestige, how could you say such thing? If

this young lama was indeed lost on Mount Wutai, then every monastery has to be searched, perhaps we must start from Fo Guang Temple."

Xinxi giggled and said, "If after we search for him in Qing Liang Temple and still cannot find him, if these lamas wish to take a look at Fo Guang Temple, they are very, very welcome to do so."

Bayan said, "Someone saw it with his own eyes that the young fellow is definitely in the Qing Liang Temple, hence we came here to inquire. Otherwise, we would not dare … would not dare to be this … this brave in the dark [昧冒- *mei mao*]." He wanted to say 'presumptuous' [冒昧 – mao mei], but had it backward again.

Cheng Guang said, "I wonder who had seen him?"

Bayan pointed to Huangfu Ge and said, "This Mr. Huangfu has seen him; he is a greatly well-known man, he can't possibly tell a lie."

Wei Xiaobao mused, "You are obviously in cahoots with each other, how can you be the witness?" He could not help but asking, "How old is that young lama?"

All along Bayan, Xinxi, Huangfu Ge and the others did not take any notice of the two children standing on the side. Suddenly hearing him asking question, they all turned their attention to him. They saw his magnificent and expensive clothing and personal adornments, the gem embedded on his hat, and the pearls pinned on his lapel. In short, he was a young boy from a rich family. The young boy attendant standing by his side was also wearing silk and satin. Xinxi laughed and said, "That young lama is more or less of the same age as young master."

Wei Xiaobao turned his head around and said, "That's what I thought. Didn't we just clearly see this young lama? He was

entering a big temple. There were several characters written in front of the temple. That's right, I think it was 'Fo Guang Temple', three large characters. This young lama has entered the Fo Guang Temple." As soon as he said that, Bayan and the others' countenances changed. But Cheng Guang was secretly happy.

Bayan shouted, "Hushuo Badao, Hushuo Jiudao[80]!" He thought by adding one degree of 'way' he would increase the degree of absurdity.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Hushuo Shidao, Hushuo Shiyidao, Hushuo Shi'erdao, Hushuo Shisandao!" [ten, eleven, twelve and thirteen, respectively]

Bayan was unable to restrain his rage; reaching out, he was going to grab Wei Xiaobao's chest. Cheng Guang raised his right hand slightly, the sleeve of his robe sent out a strong gust of wind toward the base of Bayan's elbow. Bayan stretched his left hand forward, like a bird's claw his five fingers grabbed the sleeve. Cheng Guang pulled his arm back, his sleeve coiled around the claw so that the grabbing movement was halted. Bayan called out, "You are concealing our Seat of Living Buddha's young lama, now you want to fight and kill people? Rebellion, rebellion!"

In a loud and clear voice Huangfu Ge said, "Everybody calm down, if you have something to say, let's discuss it over, don't play rough." As soon as the word 'rough' left his mouth, suddenly from outside the temple a large group of people called out together, "Mr. Huangfu's order: Everybody calm down, if you have something to say, let's discuss it over, don't play rough."

Listening to the sound, it seemed like several hundred people had surrounded Qing Liang Temple. These people heard Huangfu Ge's loud and clear voice, and immediately echoed him together, obviously they wanted to intimidate the opponent.

Even Cheng Guang, whose internal energy cultivation was very deep, as he suddenly heard this sudden rise of voice, could not help but was greatly shaken.

With a chuckle Huangfu Ge said, “Abbot Cheng Guang, you are a martial art expert of older generation in the Wulin world, yet you are covering your light and nurturing in the dark in here, everybody admires you very much. This Great Lama Bayan wants to search your precious monastery, why don’t you allow him to do so? Great Monk walks in straight path, treads on upright way, the wind clears up the sky revealing the moon, Qing Liang Temple does not have anything that other people cannot see, why would we all harm the friendliness of the Wulin world?”

Cheng Guang was secretly worried; although he himself had a high martial art skill, in Qing Liang Temple he only sat in meditation and expounded Buddhist teachings, and did not impart martial art skill to his disciples at all. So among the fifty something monks in Qing Liang Temple, very few knew martial art. When he exchanged a move with Bayan just a moment ago, he sensed that Bayan’s left hand claw, the ‘bird’s claw skill’, was indeed very formidable. And then he heard Huangfu Ge’s loud and clear voice in demonstrating his profound internal energy, it was indeed no small matter. Even without the several hundred people outside the temple, just these two martial art masters were already very difficult to resist.

Seeing he hesitating without saying anything, Huangfu Ge laughed and said, “Even if in Qing Liang Temple there are really several good-looking women, letting everybody admire them is indeed a treat for the eyes.” His words were extremely frivolous, he did not show the least bit of consideration toward Cheng Guang’s feeling.

Xinxi laughed and said, “Abbot *Shixiong*, if that’s the case, why don’t you let this Great Lama searching your temple?”

While saying that, he had a smirk on his face.

Preceding the others, Bayan walked toward the rear hall in big strides. Cheng Guang thought that the opposite party had come fully prepared, even if he could block Bayan and Huangfu Ge, he could not possibly stop the people they brought along. If a tangled battle ensued, Qing Liang Temple would suffer a great misfortune. In that instant his mind was in a whirl, he heaved a deep sigh, and could only watch helplessly as Bayan and about a dozen of his men entered the inner hall; with no other choice, he followed them in.

Bayan, Xinxi and Huangfu Ge talked among themselves in low voices, while their men were entering and searching the temple buildings and the monks' residence one by one. Without their Abbot's order, the monks of Qing Liang Temple could only glower at these men, without trying to block them at all.

Wei Xiaobao and Shuang'er were following behind Abbot Cheng Guang. They noticed that the sleeve of his monk robe was continuously trembling, obviously in his heart he was extremely angry.

Suddenly from the monks' residence in the western wing they heard someone loudly called out, "Is it him?"

Huangfu Ge rushed toward the voice, two men grabbing a middle-aged monk came out. This monk was approximately forty-some years old, and had a thin face, he said, "Why are you grabbing me?"

Huangfu Ge shook his head. The two men laughed and said, "Please forgive our offense!" and released the monk.

Wei Xiaobao's mind was as bright as snow: these men were looking for Emperor Shunzhi, there was no doubt about it.

With a cold laugh Cheng Guang said, "So you think this monk of our temple is the young lama of the Seat of Living Buddha?"

Huangfu Ge did not respond; he saw his men were dragging another middle-aged monk out. He looked at the monk's face and shook his head.

"So you know Emperor Shunzhi," Wei Xiaobao mused, "If this searching continues, sooner or later they will find Emperor Shunzhi. He is the young emperor's father, I will have to think of a way to protect him." But the opponent had many men and great force; how he was going to protect him, he did not have the slightest idea.

Several dozen people had already searched to a small vihara at the northeastern side of the monastery. Seeing the door to the courtyard was tightly closed, they called out, "Open the door, open the door!"

Cheng Guang said, "This is where a senior monk of our temple lives in seclusion; he has been here for seven years, you must not disturb his peace."

Xinxi said with a laugh, "This time people from the outside are getting in, it's not that the monk who shut himself down cannot endure it and thus trying to get out on his own account. What's the big deal about it?"

A big and tall lama called out, "Why doesn't anybody open the door? Most probably he is in here!" Lifting up his foot, he kicked the door.

Cheng Guang's shadow flashed, he had already blocked in front of the lama. The lama was unable to hold back the momentum, his right foot flew and hit Cheng Guang's lower abdomen. 'Crack!' the lama's leg bones were broken and he tumbled backwards.

Bayan let out a strange 'wah, wah' shout; his left hand flew forward, his right hand made a half circle backward, both were in the shape of a claw, clawing toward Cheng Guang. Cheng Guang stood in front of the gate. 'Whoosh, whoosh!' he sent

out two palm strikes to counter Bayan’s claws.

“Good! Wisdom Palm!” Huangfu Ge called out. A finger of his left hand went out, a gust of strong wind assaulted Cheng Guang’s face. Cheng Guang sidestepped to the left, ‘Slap!’ the strong wind struck the wooden gate.

Using the Wisdom Palm, Cheng Guang focused his attention on the battle. Bayan and Huangfu Ge launched a converging attack from left and right. Cheng Guang moved very slow, one by one he launched a series of palm attacks, seemingly without any power, but the palm created faint gusts of wind, evidently his own power was quite profound. Bayan and Huangfu Ge’s several dozen men cheered and shouted to boost these two men’s spirit. Bayan launched several fierce attacks, but all were neutralized by Cheng Guang’s palm strength.

Bayan grew impatient; increasing the speed of his attacks, he suddenly grunted, his left hand rose up, his several dozen white beards floated down, he managed to catch Cheng Guang’s beards, but his right shoulder was hit by Cheng Guang’s palm. At first he did not feel anything strange, but gradually his right arm grew heavier and heavier, it became difficult for him to raise his right hand. Suddenly he let out a roar and dodged sideways. With raised steel sabers, four lamas charged toward Cheng Guang. Cheng Guang’s leg flew up and kicked two men, his left palm struck out and landed on the third lama’s chest. “Ah!” the lama cried out loudly, and leaped back. Right this moment, the fourth lama’s saber hacked down. Cheng Guang used his sleeve to brush it away, and then the sleeve continued to coil around the lama’s wrist. He saw Bayan’s was charging forward with one hand up, the other hand down. Cheng Guang moved to the right to evade, but suddenly he felt a strong wind attacked his body. “Not good!” he groaned inwardly; swiftly he sent out a palm strike, but suddenly he felt a sharp pain on his right cheek, he was stabbed by Huangfu Ge’s finger. Although

his own palm had hit Huangfu Ge's arm, it failed to break Huangfu Ge's arm bone.

Seeing Cheng Guang's right cheek was bleeding, Shuang'er said in a low voice, "Must I help him?"

"Wait a moment," Wei Xiaobao replied. His main purpose was to find Emperor Shunzhi, supposing Shuang'er joined the fray to drive everybody out, they would still be unable to find the old emperor. Much less the opponent had many men with great force, with sabers and spears, while Shuang'er was a little girl, how could she fight these many big men?

In the meantime, the Qing Liang Temple's monks had seen their Abbot being trapped, they picked clubs and sticks of firewood and charged forward to help him fighting. But these monks did not know martial arts, as soon as they came up, their heads were broken and their blood flowing.

"Everybody stop fighting!" Cheng Guang called out.

Bayan bellowed, "Everybody kill at will!" The lamas were encouraged not to show mercy at all, in an instant four Qing Liang Temple's monk were chopped down that their heads separated from their bodies.

Seeing the viciousness of the enemy in killing people, the rest of the monks did not dare to join the fight, they only stood far away, shouting and yelling. Cheng Guang slightly lost his concentration, and was hit by Huangfu Ge's finger again. The finger was hitting the right side of his chest.

Huangfu Ge laughed and said, "Shaolin Pai's Wisdom Palm is only so-so. Isn't the Great Monk going to surrender?"

"Amitabha Buddha," Cheng Guang said, "Benefactor's sin is not small at all."

Suddenly two lamas dropped down and rolled on the ground while brandishing their sabers, trying to chop his legs. Cheng

Guang lifted up his leg and kicked, but there was a severe pain on his chest, his vision darkened, his leg only went halfway and he was unable to continue the kick. In his daze he swiped his left palm down. As soon as the palm touched the two lamas' head, both of them fainted immediately.

"Dead bald donkey!" Bayan cursed. Both hands swiftly reached forward, his ten fingers grabbed Cheng Guang's left leg. Cheng Guang was unable to stand, he collapsed to the ground. Huangfu Ge repeatedly moved his finger to seal Cheng Guang's acupoints one by one.

Bayan laughed aloud; with his right foot he kicked the wooden gate. 'Crack!' the gate flew in. Bayan said with a laugh, "Come out quickly, let everybody see your appearance."

The vihara was pitch-black and was completely quiet. "Get him out for me," Bayan said. Two lamas responded together, they rushed into the building.

Author's note: The word 'easy' (or convenient) in this chapter's title is a Buddhist term meaning 'expedient/practical method'. When expounding the Buddhist teaching, Sakyamuni (Siddharta Gautama) sensed that his teaching was not easily understood, therefore, he used a lot of 'example' to enlighten his disciples.

Chapter 18

Vajra's treasured pestle protecting the Emperor, engraved seal script on stone tablet knocking down the Toutuo[81].

(Translated by Foxs)

Fat Toutuo grabbed Wei Xiaobao's arm and pulled him out in front of the stone tablet. Wei Xiaobao randomly said that the eight copies of the sutra were separately hidden in some mountain some temple; he also said that the stone tablet also mention the Divine Dragon Cult's Cult Leader's name.

Suddenly a golden ray flashed at the doorway, a large golden pestle came out from the vihara. 'Bonk, bonk' it struck the two lamas' heads. Immediately the golden pestle withdrew. Without making any sound the two lamas fell down, dead, at the doorway, their brains burst.

This unforeseen event was greatly outside everybody's anticipation. Bayan cursed in loud voice. Three more lamas charged toward the door. This time they were prepared, they all brandished their sabers to protect their heads. The first lama had just stepped into the door, the golden pestle struck down, even the saber was knocked down, together the golden pestle and the saber struck the lama's head. With all his might the second lama raised his saber to block, but it was as if the golden pestle went down with a force of thousand catties, unexpectedly the saber failed completely in blocking the golden pestle. 'Bonk!' the lama's skull was crushed. The third lama was so scared that his countenance looked like clay. His saber fell down, he turned around and fled.

Bayan opened his mouth, cursing and swearing, but he did not dare to personally attack the door. Huangfu Ge called out, "Get on the roof, take off the roof tiles and throw them inside." Immediately four men jumped onto the roof, took off the tiles, and threw the tiles inside through the hole on the roof. Huangfu Ge called out again, "Throw sand and stoned into the building." Following his order, the men under his command picked up sand and stones from the ground and threw it into the vihara through the wooden gate.

Most of the sand and stones going through the door was hit by the man inside the building using the golden pestle so that it flew back outside, but one by one all the tiles from the roof fell down. This way, no matter how high the person inside the building's martial art skill was, he would not be able to protect himself. Suddenly, a bellow like a mad ox was heard, a big and

tall monk strode out of the building, carrying another monk in his left hand, and turning the golden pestle in his right hand like a wheel. This huge monk was at least half a head taller than ordinary man. His stature was impressive, just like a deity. Swinging the golden pestle in his hand so that it created flashing yellow light, he roared, "Are you all bored of being alive?" His face was purplish red, with short beard that looked like a clump of wild grass. His monk robe was tattered, the holes on his robe exposed his sinewy muscles, his arms were bulging and his waist thick, his hands and feet were big. Seeing this kind of awe-inspiring man, Huangfu Ge, Bayan, and the others could not help but retreated a few steps backwards.

Bayan called out, “This bald thief is only one man, what are you afraid of? Let’s attack together!”

Huangfu Ge called out, “Everybody be careful, don’t harm the monk by his side.”

Everybody turned their attention to the monk. He was approximately thirty something, tall and slim, his face looked handsome and elegant. He was looking down, as if he did not consider the situation around him was worthy to be looked at with one eye.Wei Xiaobao’s heart jumped, he thought it over, “This man must be the young emperor’s papa, it’s just that their appearances are not the same. He is lot more handsome than the young emperor. Turns out he is still this young.”

Right this moment, about a dozen lamas attacked the giant monk together. The giant lama brandished his golden pestle. Endless ‘bonk, bonk, bonk!’ was heard, each ‘bonk’ resulted in one lama fell down to the ground, struck dead by the pestle.

Huangfu Ge ran his hand over his waist and pulled out a flexible whip. From the hand of a lama subordinate of his, Bayan snatched a weapon, which was a pair of short iron hammers. The two of them attacked together from left and right. Huangfu Ge’s flexible whip trembled, the tip of his whip

coiled horizontally, ‘shua!’ it left a mark on the giant monk’s neck.

“Wah, wah!” the monk let out an unintelligible cry, while swinging his pestle to strike Bayan. Bayan raised his pair of hammers to block. There was a loud ‘Clang!’ Bayan’s arms went numb, the pair of hammers fell off his hands. But the monk’s shoulder was hit by the flexible whip again. Now everybody could see clearly that the monk only possessed extraordinary strength, but his martial art skill was only mediocre.

One lama sneaked in and grabbed the middle-aged monk’s left arm. The monk grunted, but he did not try to struggle at all. In a low voice Wei Xiaobao said “Protect that monk.”

“Yes,” Shuang’er replied. Her shadow flashed, she stretched out her hand to jab the lama’s waist, the lama blocked with his finger. She turned around and stretched out her finger in a feign attack toward Huangfu Ge’s face. Huangfu Ge turned to the right to evade, she quickly turned around and pierced the pit of Bayan’s stomach with her finger.

“Mother …” Bayan cursed and fell face up.

Shuang’er turned to the east and circled to the west, her tender hands fluttered, more than a dozen men that Bayan and Huangfu Ge’s brought along fell down one after another. Xinxi called out, “Hey, hey, young … young benefactor …”

Shuang’er laughed and said, “Hey, hey, old monk!” Stretching out her finger, she pierced his waist.

Huangfu Ge flicked his flexible whip to protect his front, back, left and right. ‘Whoosh, whoosh!’ the whip created whistling wind in a circle about a *zhang* in diameter; it was so tight that not even water would be able to penetrate. Shuang’er circled around outside the whip’s circumference. Huangfu Ge’s whip moved faster and faster, several times the whip almost struck Shuang’er’s body, but she was always able to evade with her

fast and nimble movement.

“Good kid!” Huangfu Ge called out. Sending his power to the whip, the flexible whip turned into a long spear, it went straight toward the pit of Shuang’er’s stomach. Shuang’er’s feet slipped and she fell forward, her finger extended toward Huangfu Ge’s lower abdomen. Huangfu Ge raised his left palm to block her piercing finger, followed by a flick of his flexible whip that the tip of his whip coiled back to strike Shuang’er’ back. Shuang’er dropped drown and rolled away; her position was rather awkward.

Seeing Shuang'er was in a disadvantageous situation, Wei Xiaobao was very anxious. He bent down to grab some dirt to be thrown onto Huangfu Ge's eyes, but the ground was swept very clean, he could not even grab a handful of dirt. Shuang'er had not stood up, Huangfu Ge's flexible whip had already shot down toward her. "Stop fighting!" Wei Xiaobao called out. Brandishing his golden pestle the giant monk rushed forward to help. Suddenly Shuang'er's right hand grabbed the tip of the flexible whip. Huangfu Ge exerted his strength to jerk the whip up, bringing Shuang'er's body along with it, and throwing her into the air.

Wei Xiaobao reached into his bosom, without caring what kind of stuff he got, he simply grabbed it and threw it onto Huangfu Ge's face. Pieces of white paper fluttered in the air, several dozen sheets of paper obstructed Huangfu Ge's vision. Huangfu Ge busily stretched out his hand to brush the paper away, the power in his right hand diminished instantly. Right this moment, the giant monk's golden pestle was also coming down on the top of his head. Huangfu Ge was greatly shocked, hastily he ducked down. Shuang'er's body was still in the air, without waiting her feet to touch the ground, her left foot kicked toward his head and hit the taiyang [sun] acupoint on Huangfu Ge's head.

"Aiyo!" he cried out and fell backward. 'Bang!' sparks flew everywhere as the golden pestle struck the ground, less than half a *chi* from his head. As soon as Shuang'er's right foot landed on the ground, she snatched the flexible whip from his hand.

"Good skill!" Wei Xiaobao cheered. Pulling his dagger, he rushed forward and held it in front of Huangfu Ge's left eye. "Tell your men to get out," he shouted, "No one is allowed to come in!"

Huangfu Ge was unable to move; feeling the thick cold air of the dagger on his face he was greatly amazed. "All of you get out," he called out, "Tell everybody no one is allowed to come in." His several dozen men hesitated for half a day. Wei Xiaobao made a move as if he was going to thrust his dagger to kill, the men immediately rushed out of the temple.

The giant monk opened his round eyes wide, he gazed at Shuang'er for half a day. "Hey," he said, "Good child!" Picking up the golden pestle with his left hand and supporting the middle-aged monk, he walked back into the vihara.

Wei Xiaobao rushed two steps forward, he wanted to talk to the middle-aged monk, but he was too late. Shuang'er went toward Cheng Guang and unsealed his acupoints, saying, "These bad eggs are violent, vicious and overbearing, they offended the Great Monk."

Cheng Guang stood up, put his palms together and said, "Young benefactor's body and mind possess supreme feat, you have saved my temple from great catastrophe. *Lao Na* has the blurred vision of an old person, I did not recognize an expert, and thus has failed miserably to show respect."

"No, you have not," Shuang'er replied, "All along you were very polite toward our young master."

Only after calming himself down did Wei Xiaobao realize that

the paper he tossed onto Huangfu Ge's face and blurred his vision was actually a big wad of banknotes. He laughed aloud and said, "Those who see banknotes and not surrender, perhaps only a few in this world. I attacked using several tens of thousands *taels*, you simply can't not cry out 'surrender'." Giggling, Shuang'er picked up the scattered banknotes and returned them to Wei Xiaobao.

"Wei *Gongzi* [young master]," Cheng Guang asked, "How should we deal with the situation here?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "These three friends, tell your men to disperse!"

Immediately Huangfu Ge raised his voice, "All of you, go down the mountain and wait for me there." They heard several hundred men outside complied together, followed by the rustling noise of footsteps, in an instant they have all left.

Cheng Guang was relieved. He reached down to unseal Xinxi's acupoint. "Abbot, hold on," Wei Xiaobao said, "I want to talk to you first."

"Yes!" Cheng Guang replied, "But these several *Shixiong* have had their acupoints sealed for quite a long time, their hands and feet are numb, I must unseal their acupoints first."

"It won't do any harm to leave them for a while," Wei Xiaobao said, "Let's go to that hall over there and sit down."

Cheng Guang nodded. "Yes," he said. Turning to Xinxi, he said, "*Shixiong*, please don't be impatient, I will be back shortly to unseal your acupoints." Taking Wei Xiaobao along, he went to the Buddhist hall on the west.

"Abbot," Wei Xiaobao said, "Are these people really here to look for the young lama?" Cheng Guang was at a loss for words, he was unable to answer. Wei Xiaobao leaned forward and whispered in his ear, "I know that they are here for that Emperor Monk."

Cheng Guang's body trembled. He nodded slowly. "Turns out the young benefactor has already known," he said.

In a low voice Wei Xiaobao continued, "I came to your precious monastery, performing repentance ritual and Buddhist ceremony was a fake reason, actually I receive ... receive an order to protect the Emperor Monk."

Cheng Guang nodded. "I see," he said, "*Lao Na* has already suspected as much. Young benefactor was rushing to Qing Liang Temple, your manner did not look like someone desiring to perform a Buddhist ceremony."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Although we have captured Huangfu Ge, Bayan, and the other, it's like capturing a tiger is easy, letting the tiger go is difficult. Even if we take the trouble of letting them go, in just a few days they would return to nag at us endlessly; it will be very troublesome!"

"But we must not kill them," Cheng Guang said, "There have been quite a number of people losing their lives in this temple today. Ay, Amitabha Buddha, Amitabha Buddha."

"Killing them would be useless," Wei Xiaobao said, "How about this: tell your men to tie them up. We will investigate carefully: why did they come to look for the Emperor Monk?"

Cheng Guang was reluctant. "This is a peaceful Buddhist establishment," he said, "We, who have left home, secretly tie up people and interrogate them, it does not seem reasonable."

"What do you mean unreasonable?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "They came here and killed the monks in your temple, are you saying they are being reasonable? If we do not investigate clearly and think of a way to deal with them, and then they come back to kill, to set your Qing Liang Temple on fire, what should we do?"

Cheng Guang thought for a while, then he nodded and said, "That sounds reasonable. Let it be as Benefactor instructed." He clapped his hands to summon a monk, and ordered him,

"Please invite that Mr. Huangfu here, we have something we'd like to consult with him."

Wei Xiaobao said, "This Huangfu Ge is very crafty, I am afraid we can't find anything from him. Let us ask that Great Lama first."

"Right, right," Cheng Guang said, "Why didn't I think about it earlier?"

Two monks dragged Bayan into the hall, they were angry at him for killing the monks of their temple, hence they threw him heavily on the floor. "Ay," Cheng Guang said, "How come you do not have any manners toward the Great Lama?"

"Yes!" the two monks replied, and withdrew out of the hall.

Wei Xiaobao lifted a chair with his left hand, and then with the dagger in his right hand, he scraped layer after layer off the chair's leg. The dagger was incomparably sharp, slice by slice the chair's leg was cut away, until it was only about a tenth or a twentieth of its original thickness, just like peeling a fruit. Cheng Guang watched with eyes opened wide, he did not understand Wei Xiaobao's intention.

Wei Xiaobao put down the chair, and walked toward Bayan. He ran his left hand over Bayan's head, and raised the dagger in his right hand, making a scraping motion just like scraping away the chair's leg just a moment ago.

"Don't!" Bayan cried out.

Cheng Guang also shouted, "You can't do that!"

"What do you mean I can't do that?" Wei Xiaobao said angrily, "I know all Tibetan Great Lamas are trained in some kind of iron head skill, saber and spear won't penetrate their heads. When I was in Beijing, I have personally used this dagger to scrape a Great Lama's head, I spent half a day and I could not cut him down. Great Lama, are you a genuine goods at fair

prices, or are you a fake article? If I do not test you, how am I going to find out?"

Bayan hastily said, "I have never trained that iron head skill, if you scrape my head, I'll die."

"Not necessarily," Wei Xiaobao said, "If I cut you two or three *cun*, you might not necessarily die. Let me scrape only a layer of your skull, just until I can see your brains. If you are telling the truth, your brain will be motionless, but if you lie, your brain will boil endlessly, just like vegetable boiled in water. I have something to ask you, if I don't scrape open your brain, how do I know if you are telling the truth or a lie?"

"Don't scrape, don't scrape," Bayan said, "I will tell you the truth."

Wei Xiaobao ran his hand over Bayan's scalp and said, "The truth or a lie, how do I know?"

"If I don't tell you the truth," Bayan said, "It won't be too late for you to scrape my scalp then."

Wei Xiaobao thought for a moment and said, "Very well, let me ask you this: who told you to come to Qing Liang Temple?"

"It was the Great Lama Sheng Luo Tuo of Pusa Ding Zhen Rong Yuan [lit. courtyard of the genuine appearance of the crown of Bodhisattva's head] who sent me here," Bayan replied.

"Amitabha Buddha," Cheng Guang said, "The green and yellow temples of Mount Wutai have never had any hatred or desire for revenge, how can the Great Lama of Pusa Ding send you here to create trouble?"

"I did not come to create trouble," Bayan said, "Sheng Luo Tuo *Shixiong* asked me to look for a monk in his thirties; he told me this monk had stolen the treasured scripture of our Living Buddha in Lhasa, and went into hiding in Qing Liang Temple, thus we must find and arrest him."

"Amitabha Buddha," Cheng Guang said, "How can there be such thing?"

Wei Xiaobao raised his dagger and shouted, "You are lying, I am going to scrape open your scalp and look at your brain."

"I am not, I am not lying," Bayan cried out, "If you don't believe me, go ask Sheng Luo Tuo *Shixiong*. He told us to pretend that we are looking for a young lama, but actually we are looking for that middle-aged monk. He also said that that Mr. Huangfu knew this monk, so he asked him to accompany us looking for this monk. Sheng Luo Tuo *Shixiong* said that this monk has stolen our secret Tibetan Tantra Scripture, 'Da Pi Lu Zhe Na Fo Shen Bian Jia Chi Jing' [I won't bother translating this, I think it is a transliteration of some Sanskrit words; if anybody can help me, that would be great]; it's not a small matter at all. If I managed to get hold of this monk, I will perform a great service, when I return to Lhasa, the Living Buddha will certainly reward me heavily."

Wei Xiaobao saw his expression looked sincere, it did not appear to be fake at all, so he assumed Bayan was also being deceived by others, who did not want him to know the truth about Shunzhi. Thereupon he took out the Tibetan letter he snatched away from the three Tibetan lamas Shuang'er had caught. He opened it up and said, "Read it for me, tell me what it says." While saying that, he placed the blade of his dagger flat on the top of Bayan's head.

[Translator's note: since in the 3rd edition Wei Xiaobao had never met the three lamas, all reference to the letter is gone. All information still exist, it's just that Bayan told him that the information was 'according to his Sheng Luo Tuo *Shixiong*'.]

"Yes, yes!" Bayan said, and then he uttered some gibberish as he read the letter.

Wei Xiaobao nodded. "Not bad," he said, "You read very well,

you did not miss a single word. But this *Fangzhang Dashi* does not understand Tibetan, please translate the letter into Chinese for him."

Bayan said, "The letter says, this big … big personality is indeed in the Qing Liang Temple of Mount Wutai. We recently received information that Shen … Shen Long Jiao is going to invite him, we must … must strike first and gain the upper hand."

Hearing him mentioning 'Shen Long Jiao' three characters, Wei Xiaobao believed he was not lying. "What else does the letter say?" he asked.

Bayan said, "The letter says, going to Qing Liang Temple to invite this big personality is not difficult, but perhaps Shen Long Jiao has also received the information and is going to act; therefore, Sheng Luo Tuo *Shixiong* is asking Da He'er *Shixiong* of Beijing to hasten in sending a martial art master to come and render his assistance. If … if the Great Lama Sang Jie has arrived in Beijing, the Senior is unequalled in the present age, if he personally take charge of this matter, it will be … will be a 'not one in ten thousand failures' [wan shi wu yi] …"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and cursed, "Damn it! It's 'not one failure in ten thousand (matters)' [wan wu yi shi – surefire, absolutely safe]. What do you mean 'not one in ten thousand failures'?" That he was able to correct someone else's mistake in Chinese expression, it was a 'hard to meet in a thousand years' opportunity, not one chance in ten thousand matters, thereupon he was very pleased with himself.

"Yes, yes," Bayan said, "It's one in ten thousand without failure [wan yi wu shi] …"

Wei Xiaobao laughed, "Your Lama Granny," he said, "You're still saying it wrong. What else?"

"Nothing else," Bayan said, "There's nothing else below that."

“Damn it,” Wei Xiaobao cursed, “What do you mean there’s nothing else below that? Is it I don’t have anything else down below, or is it you don’t have anything else down below?”

“We all … we all don’t have anything else down below,” Bayan replied.

“What do you mean we all don’t have anything else down below?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“There are no more letters below that,” Bayan replied.

Wei Xiaobao burst into loud laughter. He asked, “What kind of man is that Huangfu Ge?”

“He is the helper that Sheng Luo Tuo *Shixiong* invited,” Bayan replied, “He arrived only last night.”

Wei Xiaobao nodded. He turned to Cheng Guang and said, “Abbot, I want to examine that fat monk from the Fo Guang Temple. If you don’t feel comfortable, there is no harm in you listening from outside the window.”

“That would be best, that would best,” Cheng Guang said. He ordered Bayan to be taken out and Xinxi to be brought in, while he himself returned to the meditation room, he was not willing to listen from outside the window.

As he entered the room, Xinxi's face was all smiles as he said, "Two benefactors are young, yet your martial art skill is superb. *Lao Na* has neither seen nor heard about it. Young heroes, really amazing, amazing!"

"F*ck your granny," Wei Xiaobao cursed, "Who needs your boot-licking?" And he kicked Xinxi's buttocks.

Although Xinxi was in pain, his smile did not diminish; he said, "Yes, yes, all real heroes and warriors definitely do not like to hear boot-licking. But the old monk is being sincere, it can't be considered as boot-licking."

"Let me ask you," Wei Xiaobao said, "You came to create havoc in Qing Liang Temple, who sent you here?"

"Since benefactor asks, the old monk does not dare to conceal anything from you," Xinxi replied, "The Great Lama Sheng Luo Tuo of Pusa Ding Zhen Rong Yuan sent two hundred *taels* for me, asking me to accompany his *Shidi* [younger martial brother] Bayan to come to Qing Liang Temple to look for ... look for someone. The old monk cannot receive a reward without deserving it, therefore, I was obliged to accompany him."

Wei Xiaobao kicked him again. "Rubbish!" he cursed, "You still think you can lie to me? Quickly tell me the truth."

"Yes, yes," Xinxi said, "I can't hide it from the benefactor, the Great Lama sent me three hundred *taels*."

"Obviously it was a thousand *taels*," Wei Xiaobao said.

"To tell you the truth, it was five hundred *taels*," Xinxi said, "If I received one more *tael*, the old monk is not a human."

"What kind of 'thing' is that Huangfu ge?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Xinxi replied, "That son of a b1tch is not a good thing, it was that crafty lama Bayan who brought him along. As soon as benefactor let me go, the old monk will immediately take him to Wutai County; I will ask the County Head Magistrate to punish him properly. Qing Liang Temple is a peaceful and quiet Buddhist establishment, how can we allow him to commit outrages here? Young benefactor, those several lives, along with several perished lamas, we can push the blame on his head."

Wei Xiaobao's countenance sank, he said, "Clearly you killed them all, how can you push the blame on someone else's head?"

Xinxi beseeched him, "Good Young Master, please spare me."

Wei Xiaobao had him removed from the room, and had

Huangfu Ge in to be interrogated. But this man was very tough, he refused to answer anything. He ignored Wei Xiaobao's intimidation with the dagger. When Shuang'er sealed his 'tian huo' acupoint, the pain was unbearable that he could not help but groaning, but he still refused to answer Wei Xiaobao's question. He simply said, "If you have guts, just stab your master dead with your dagger; torturing people is not a hero's conduct."

Wei Xiaobao respected him as a real man. "Alright," he said, "We won't torture you." He ordered Shuang'er to unseal his 'tian huo' acupoint.

After he had Huangfu Ge taken out of the room, he invited Cheng Guang back and said, "We must consult that big personality on how to conclude this matter."

Cheng Guang shook his head, "He is resolved not to see any outsider."

Enraged, Wei Xiaobao said, "What do you mean he does not want to see outsiders? Hasn't he seen outsiders just now? If we washed our hands and did not care, wouldn't he be taken away by outsiders? In just a few days, the Great Lama of Beijing will send someone else here, there will be some unequalled martial art masters, and then there will be some Shen Long [divine dragon] Jiao, Wugui [turtle] Jiao people. Even if we wanted to help, we would still be no match for that many people."

"You are right," Cheng Guang said.

"Go talk to him," Wei Xiaobao said, "The situation is urgent, we simply must come up with a way to deal with this problem."

Cheng Guang shook his head and said, "*Lao Na* has agreed that everyone in this temple, *Lao Na* included, will never talk to him."

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "I am not a monk of your temple, I'll go and talk to him."

"You can't, you can't," Cheng Guang said, "As soon as young benefactor enters the vihara, his *Shidi*, that giant monk Xing Dian, may kill you with his pestle."

"He won't strike me dead," Wei Xiaobao said.

Cheng Guang cast a glance toward Shuang'er before saying, "Even if you send your honorable servant to deal with Monk Xing Dian, Xing Chi will still refuse to talk to you."

"Xing Chi?" Wei Xiaobao asked, "Is his Buddhist name Xing Chi?"

"Yes," Cheng Guang replied, "Turns out benefactor did not know it."

Wei Xiaobao sighed and said, "Since that's the case, there is nothing I can do. Since you don't have any `not one in ten thousand failures' [wan shi wu yi] good plan, it's a pity that a nice ancient temple like Qing Liang Temple will be destroyed in your hands as the Abbot."

Cheng Guang frowned and showed deep concern on his face, he rubbed his hands repeatedly. Suddenly he said, "I'll go and ask Yulin *Shixiong*, perhaps he has a solution."

"And who is this Yulin *Dashi*?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

"He is Xing Chi's religious Shifu[82]," Cheng Guang replied.

"That's great," Wei Xiaobao delightedly said, "Take me to see this old monk."

Immediately Cheng Guang led Wei Xiaobao and Shuang'er out from the back door of Qing Liang Temple and walked about a *li* to a tiny old temple. There was no inscribed board above the temple's door. Cheng Guang walked straight in, and continued toward the meditation room at the back. They saw an old monk, with white hair and white eyebrows, sitting on a *putuan* [meditation mat]. His eyes were closed in meditation; he

seemed to be completely oblivious of the three people who had just walked in.

Cheng Guang signaled them with his hand, and then he quietly sat down on another *putuan* at the side, lowered his head and closed his eyes, and put his palms together. Wei Xiaobao snickered inwardly; following his example, he also sat down. Shuang'er stood behind him. All around them was very quiet, it seemed that this old monk was the only one in this tiny temple.

After a long time, the old monk still had not moved a single jot, it was as if he was already dead. Unexpectedly, Cheng Guang also did not move at all. Wei Xiaobao's hands were numb and his legs ached, he was greatly impatient, he stood up and sat back down again, he sat down and stood back up again, while in his heart he cursed the old monk's eighteen ancestors several dozen times.

Then, after a long time, the old monk finally let out a deep breath and slowly opened his eyes. He was not surprised at all to see people in front of him, he simply nodded his head slightly.

Cheng Guang said, "*Shixiong*, Xing Chi's earthly karma has not been broken, some people came to the temple to look for him, I am asking *Shixiong* to resolve it according to the Dharma."

The old monk Yulin said, "All circumstances are born in the heart, the resolution is already inside."

Cheng Guang said, "The outside devils are heavy, Qing Liang Temple is in trouble." Thereupon he narrated how Xinxi, Bayan, Huangfu Ge, and the others had come to kidnap Xing Chi, fortunately Wei Xiaobao, master and servant, had lent their hands to save him. He also told him how several people from both sides had died, and how the enemy did not seem to be

willing to let the matter drop. Yulin listened silently without making any sound, and then he closed his eyes again and went into meditation.

Wei Xiaobao was furious; suddenly he sprang up and shouted, "F*ck ..." But he only managed to utter one word, Cheng Guang repeatedly signaled him, asking him not to be angry, and asking him to sit down and wait. This time Yulin's meditation lasted less than an hour. Wei Xiaobao mused, "From among the big robbers and strong bandits, vixens and scoundrels of the world, no one is as annoying as this old monk."

After all the trouble, Yulin finally opened his eyes once again. He asked, "Benefactor Wei came from Beijing?"

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"Benefactor Wei is working at His Majesty's side?" Yulin asked again.

Wei Xiaobao was shocked; he sprang up and said, "You ... you ... how did you know?"

"*Lao Na* is only guessing," Yulin replied.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "This old monk is of some demonic school, perhaps he really has some magical power." Thereupon he did not dare to curse him in his heart anymore; he sat back down obediently.

Yulin said, "His Majesty sent Benefactor Wei to see Xing Chi, what message do you have?"

Wei Xiaobao thought, "This old monk knows everything, it will be useless to hide the truth from him." Thereupon he said, "His Majesty learned that the Old Emperor is still in the world of the living, he is both delighted and sad, he sent me to kowtow and pay his respect to the Old Emperor. If ... if the Old Emperor is willing to return to the Palace and be his old self, nothing can be better than that." Actually, Kangxi said that after the truth was

ascertained, he himself would go up Mount Wutai to have an audience with his *Fu Huang* [father emperor], but Wei Xiaobao kept this words and did not say it.

Yulin said, "His Majesty ordered benefactor to take what kind of token of confidence?"

From his innermost pocket Wei Xiaobao took out the edict Kangxi had written with his own hand, and presented it with both hands, saying, "*Dashi*, please look at this." The imperial edict said, “The Imperial Bodyguard Deputy Chief Wei Xiaobao, hereby being granted by the Emperor himself to wear Yellow Magua, is being sent to visit the Wutai Mountain region on official business. Various provinces’ civil and military officials are ordered to give assistance. By the Emperor himself.”

Yulin took the letter, read it, and returned it to Wei Xiaobao, saying, "Turns out it is the Imperial Bodyguard Deputy Chief Wei *Daren*, forgive me for failing to show respect."

In his heart Wei Xiaobao was very proud of himself, thinking, "Do you dare to despise me now?" But looking at Yulin's face, he did not see any respectful expression, his conceited heart immediately dissipated.

"Benefactor Wei," Yulin said, "In your opinion, how should we handle this matter?"

"I want to kowtow to the Old Emperor," Wei Xiaobao said, "And wait for the Old Emperor's instruction."

Yulin said, "Formerly, his riches reached the four seas, but after leaving home and become a monk, the earthly karma has already been severed. These three words 'lao huang ye' [Old Emperor] can no longer be mentioned, so as not to shock him and disturb his peaceful cultivation." Wei Xiaobao was silent without replying anything.

Yulin continued, "Please go back and report to His Majesty, Xing Chi is not willing to see you, he is also unwilling to see any

outsider."

"His Majesty is his son," Wei Xiaobao said, "He is not an outsider."

"Why is it called 'leave home'?" Yulin said, "It's because home is no longer home, wife and children are outsiders."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Apparently it is you, the old monk, who is playing trick, always stand on the way. Even if the Old Emperor is unwilling to return to the Palace, he might not necessarily be unwilling to see his own son." He said, "Since that's the case, I will dispatch men and horses to go up Mount Wutai to guard and protect, we must not let idle people to enter the temple and create disturbance."

Yulin showed a faint smile as he said, "This way, Qing Liang Temple will turn into an inner courtyard of the Palace, or a government office; the Imperial Bodyguard Deputy Chief Wei *Daren* becomes a messenger at the Qing Liang Temple. To be blunt with you, if that's the case, Xing Chi might as well return to the Palace in Beijing."

"So *Dashi* has another great idea to protect the Old ... the Senior," Wei Xiaobao said, "*Zaixia* will ... will listen with respectful attention."

Yulin smiled and said, "Benefactor Wei is so young, yet has such an awesome background, no wonder that at your teenage year you have already occupied such a high-ranking post." He paused for a moment, and then continued, "Great idea, that I do not have, those who have left home stand aloof from worldly affair, we resign ourselves to adversity. Thank you very much for Benefactor Wei's kind intention, if Qing Liang Temple is really facing a misfortune, we'll leave it to fate to escape from calamity." Finished speaking, he put his palms together to salute, closed his eyes, and went back to meditation.

Cheng Guang stood up, signaled with his hand, and withdrew

toward the door, where he bowed with palms together toward Yulin. Wei Xiaobao made faces toward Yulin, stuck out his tongue, put the thumb of his right hand on his own nose, with the other four fingers waving toward Yulin. With this gesture he was saying, "What a stink, what a stink!" Yulin had his eyes closed, he did not see anything.

When the three of them were outside, Cheng Guang said, "Yulin *Dashi* is an eminent senior monk, he has reached the enlightenment level. *Lao Na* is going to release Abbot Xinxi and the others and let them go. Benefactor Wei, our meeting today is brought together by fate, let us part here." Finished speaking, he brought his palms together, bowed to salute, and left. Unexpectedly he did not let Wei Xiaobao to re-enter Qing Liang Temple.

Wei Xiaobao's heart was on fire; he said, "Very well, since you already have a brilliant scheme that is ‘not one in ten thousand failures’ (wan shi wu yi), it's actually me who was being meddlesome."

He told Shuang'er to fetch Yu Ba and his retinue, and then without telling anybody else they went down the mountain, back to Ling Jing Temple to spend the night there.

The previous night he had donated seventy *taels* of silver to the Ling Jing Temple. When the administrator of the monastery saw the big benefactor once again graced their temple with his visit, he eagerly and attentively welcomed them.

In the guestroom, with one hand supporting his cheek, Wei Xiaobao contemplated, “I have seen the Old Emperor. Turns out he is not that old, but he is in a very dangerous situation; the Tibetan Lamas want to capture him, the Shen Long Jiao also want to get him. That old bald thief Yulin is putting on an act, but does not have the least bit of farting skill; what good is Abbot Cheng Guang one man alone? I am afraid in just a few days the Old Emperor will be captured by those people, and

then how am I going to explain to Xiao Xuanzi?”

As he turned his head around, he saw Shuang’er’s beautiful eyebrows were furrowed, she looked really upset. “Shuang’er,” he asked, “Why are you unhappy?”

“Nothing,” Shuang’er replied.

“I know you have a load on your mind,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Quickly tell me.”

“It’s really nothing,” Shuang’er replied.

Suddenly Wei Xiaobao remembered something. “Ah, I get it,” he said, “You are blaming me for being an official in the Imperial Court, but all along have never told you.”

Shuang’er’s eyes turned red as she said, “The Tatar Emperor is a big evil man, *Xianggong* you … how can you be their official? Not only that, you are a high-ranking official.” While saying that, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Wei Xiaobao was taken aback. “Silly child,” he said, “Why do you have to cry over that?”

Sobbing and sniffling, Shuang’er said, “The Third Mistress has given me to *Xianggong*, she told me to serve you, to obey your commands. But … but you are a … a high-ranking official in the Imperial Court, my papa, mama, and two *gege* [older brother], were all killed by evil government officials. You … you …” And she burst out crying.

Momentarily Wei Xiaobao was at a loss of what to do. “Alright, alright!” he hastily said, “I will tell you everything. Let me tell you the truth, my position as a government official is only a cover, I am the *Xiangzhu* of Green Wood Hall of Tian Di Hui, the Heaven is my father, the Earth is my mother, we fight the Qing to restore the Ming. Do you understand? My Shifu is Tian Di Hui’s *Zongduozhu*, I have already told your Third Mistress everything. Our Tian Di Hui stand to oppose the Imperial Court.

My Shifu sent me to infiltrate the Imperial Palace to become an officer, for the purpose of spying on the Tatars' movement. This is top secret information, if this info leaks out, my life cannot be protected anymore."

Shuang'er reached out and pressed his hand against Wei Xiaobao's lips. "Don't say anything anymore," she said in a low voice, "It's all my fault, I forced you to tell me." While saying that, her tears were turned into laughter. She continued, "*Xianggong* is a good man, naturally you can't possibly do bad things. I … I really am a silly servant girl."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "You are a well-behaved girl." Pulling her hand, he let her sit on the *kang*, by his side. In a low voice he told her everything about Shunzhi and Kangxi. He said, "The young emperor is only a teenager, his father has left home to become a Buddhist monk and no longer wants to be with him. Don't you think we should pity him? Those fellows who came to get him today were all very, very bad people, how fortunate it was that you saved him."

Shuang'er let out a breath and said, "Finally I did a good thing."

Wei Xiaobao said, "No more than sending the Buddha onto the Western Paradise. Those people were released by the Abbot. Definitely they are not going to let go, they will come back to get that old emperor, cut the flesh of his body piece by piece, cook it, and eat it; won't that be terrible?" He knew Shuang'er had a good heart, in order to arouse her courage so that she would be willing to save people, he intentionally pictured Shunzhi's plight to be utterly dire.

Shuang'er shivered; "Why would they want to eat his flesh?" she asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Monk Tangseng[83] went to the Western Paradise to fetch the scriptures; have you heard this tale?"

"I have," Shuang'er replied, "And there were Sun Wukong and Zhu Bajie[84] too."

"Along the way, they met many demons," Wei Xiaobao said, "They all wanted to eat Tangseng's flesh; they said he was a holy monk, if they ate his flesh, they would become Buddhist immortal."

"Ah, I know," Shuang'er said, "These bad people thought that the Old Emperor is also a holy monk."

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said, "You are really smart. The Old Emperor Monk can be compared to Tangseng, and those bad people are the demons. I am the monkey Sun, Sun Xingzhe [another name for Sun Wukong], and you are … you are …" Speaking to this point, he raised his palms to cover his own ears, because right that moment, a slap was coming to his face.

Shuang'er laughed and said, "You are saying I am the Zhu Bajie?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Your appearance looks like Guanyin Pusa [Goddess of Mercy], but your action looks like Zhu Bajie."

Shuang'er quickly waved her hand, "Don't say anything to offend the Bodhisattva," she said, "*Xianggong*, you may be the Shancai Boy Hong Hai'er[85] by the Guanyin Pusa's side, and I …" Speaking to this point, her face blushed, she did not continue whatever she was going to say next.

"That's right!" Wei Xiaobao said, "I can be the Shancai Boy, and you are the Long Nu [dragon girl]. The two of us will always be together, and whatever happens we will never part."

Shuang'er's cheeks blushed even deeper, she said in a low voice, "Naturally I will serve you forever, unless … unless you don't want me anymore, and drive me away."

Wei Xiaobao raised his palm to make a cutting gesture across

his own neck and said, “Even if you cut my head, I will never drive you away. Unless you don’t want me anymore, and sneak out on your own.”

Shuang’er also raised her palm to make a cutting gesture across her own neck and said, “Even if you cut my head, I will never leave.” The two of them burst out in loud laughter.

Ever since Shuang’er followed Wei Xiaobao, she had always observed master-servant relationship strictly, very little did she ever chat and laugh with him. This moment, after listening to Wei Xiaobao telling her the truth about him, her heart felt happy and at ease. By laughing together like this, the friendship between them grew several degrees more intimate.

“Alright,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Now that the problem between us is sorted out, we have to think of a way, how are we going to save Tangseng?”

Shuang’er laughed and said, “To save Monk Tangseng, the Great Sage the Equal of Heaven[86] had always come up with an idea, Zhu Bajie was only a bum beetle.”

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “If Zhu Bajie was as good-looking as you are, Tangseng would never leave home to become a Buddhist monk.”

“Why is that?” Shuang’er asked.

Wei Xiaobao replied, “Naturally Tangseng would take Zhu Bajie as his wife.”

‘Pfft,’ Shuang’er broke into laughter. “Zhu Bajie was a pig demon, who would want to take him as a wife?”

Hearing Shuang’er mentioning taking a pig demon as a wife, Wei Xiaobao suddenly remembered the ‘huadiao fuling’ pig, in which Mu Jianping came to him; he wondered where she and Fang Yi were right this moment, and whether she was safe and sound. Seeing Wei Xiaobao was staring blankly, lost in thought,

Shuang’er did not dare to interrupt his train of thought.

A moment later, Wei Xiaobao said, “I have found a way not to let those bad people catch the Old Emperor. Shuang’er, if, for example, there is a similar treasure, and a lot of thieves and bandits want to steal it, what should we do, so that those thieves and bandits cannot steal it?”

Shuang’er replied, “When we see thieves and bandits come to steal it, we capture them.”

Wei Xiaobao shook his head, “The thieves and bandits are too many, we cannot catch them all. We must become thieves and bandits ourselves.”

“We become thieves and bandits?” Shuang’er asked.

“Right!” Wei Xiaobao said, “We strike first and gain the upper hand. If we steal the treasure first and have it in our hands, then other thieves and bandits cannot steal it.”

Shuang’er clapped her hands and said with a laugh, “I get it, we catch the Old Emperor Monk first.”

“Exactly,” Wei Xiaobao said, “Without further ado, let’s leave now.”

The two of them reached the perimeter of the Qing Liang Temple. Wei Xiaobao said, “The sky is not dark yet, stealing stuff or stealing a monk, we must wait until the sky is dark.” The two of them hid in the wood, with great difficulty waiting for the whole mountain to be shrouded in darkness, and all noises ceased.

In a low voice Wei Xiaobao said, “In the temple, only Abbot one person knows martial art, luckily in the fight just now, he suffered an injury, he must be lying down to rest by now. You go seal that big fat monk Xing Dian’s acupoint, and then we can steal the Old Emperor monk out. It’s just that Xing Dian’s strength is enormous, that golden pestle of his is very

formidable, you must be very careful.” Shuang’er nodded, indicating that she understood.

After listening attentively and convinced that there was nobody around, the two of them quietly leaped over the enclosure and walked toward the vihara where Shunzhi was meditating. They saw the board gate was already closed, but the damage done on the door by the kick earlier that day had not been repaired, it was put there only as a shield against the wind. Creeping closed to the wall, Shuang’er went in. She pulled the board facing left, and saw a flash or yellow light. ‘Whoosh!’ the golden pestle struck down from the gap between the door leaves.

Shuang’er waited until the golden pestle swung back up before she swiftly leaped in, while stretching out her finger to seal the two acupoints on Xing Dian’s chest one after another. “Really sorry!” she said in a low voice. Raising both hands, she grabbed the golden pestle in his hands. Xing Dian’s acupoints were sealed, his body turned weak and he slowly dropped down. The golden pestle was more than a hundred catties. If Shuang’er did not catch it, it would fell down and crush his toes. Wei Xiaobao followed; he dodged inside and pulled the door leaf.

The vihara was very small; in the darkness, he vaguely saw someone was sitting on a *putuan*. Wei Xiaobao knew it must be the Emperor Shunzhi whose Buddhist name was Xing Chi. Immediately he kowtowed and said, “Your servant Wei Xiaobao, who saved your honorable self during the day. Old Emperor, please do not panic.” Xing Chi was silent without making any noise.

Wei Xiaobao continued, “The Old Emperor is meditating quietly in here, actually, it is very good; however, there are a lot of bad people outside who want to capture the Old Emperor, who want to do you harm. In order to protect the Old Emperor, your servant would like to invite you to another peaceful place, so

that the bad people won't be able to get you."

Xing Chi still did not reply. Wei Xiaobao said, "Well then, would the Old Emperor please leave together with your servant?"

A long time passed, Wei Xiaobao saw him still sit cross-legged, motionless. By this time Wei Xiaobao had been in the dark for quite a while, he started to be able to see more clearly. He noticed that Xing Chi's posture in meditating was exactly the same as Yulin whom he saw during the day. Wei Xiaobao was not sure if he was really meditating, or he was simply ignoring him. He said, "The Old Emperor's real identity is already known, there is no one in Qing Liang Temple who can protect you. A group of the enemy has left, another group will come, in the end, the Old Emperor will be captured by them. We'd better find another quiet place where you can meditate in peace."

Xing Chi still did not reply. Xing Dian suddenly said, "You, two children are good people, luckily you saved me during the day. When my *Shixiong* is meditating, he does not talk to anyone. Where do you want him to go?" His voice was originally very loud, but he struggled hard to lower his voice, so that it became very hoarse.

Wei Xiaobao stood up and said, "Anywhere is alright. Wherever your *Shixiong* wishes to go, we will accompany him there. So long as those bad people cannot find him, the two of you can meditate and chant the names of Buddha in peace and quiet."

"We do not chant the names of Buddha," Xing Dian said.

"Alright," Wei Xiaobao said, "Do not chant the names of Buddha is also fine. Shuang'er, quickly unseal this *Dashi*'s acupoints."

Shuang'er stretched out her hand to massage Xing Dian's back and the side of his torso to unseal his acupoints. "I am really sorry," she said.

Xing Dian respectfully said to Xing Chi, “*Shixiong*, these two children are inviting us to temporarily go out and hide.”

Xing Chi said, “Shifu has not told us to leave Qing Liang Temple.” His voice was very clear and bright. It was the very first time that Wei Xiaobao heard his voice.

Xing Dian said, “If the enemies carry out a large scale operation to attack, these two children won’t be able to resist.”

“All circumstances are born in the heart,” Xing Chi said, “When it come to danger, everywhere in the world is dangerous. When the heart is peaceful, everywhere in the world is peaceful. The other day you killed and injured many people, and thus greatly accumulated evil business. Hereafter, no matter what, you must not rush indiscriminately into action without clear understanding.”

Xing Dian stared blankly for half a day before saying, “*Shixiong*’s direction is true.” Turning his head toward Wei Xiaobao he said, “*Shixiong* does not want to leave, you have heard him.”

Wei Xiaobao knitted his brows and said, “If the enemy came to get your *Shixiong*, slicing the flesh of his body piece by piece with a knife, what would you do?”

Xing Dian said, “None among the common people does not die; to live several years longer, or several years shorter, there is not much difference.”

“What do you mean there is not much difference?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “Then there is no difference between a dead person and a living person, there is no difference between man and woman, there is also no difference between monk and turtle or pig?”

“All living creatures are equal,” Xing Dian said, “It has always been like that since the beginning.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “No wonder one is called Xing Chi, the other is called Xing Dian; they are indeed foolish and inverted[87]. Urging them to leave is unsuccessful. If we seal the Old Emperor’s acupoint and carry him out, it is indeed too disrespectful, plus it will be difficult to escape from other people’s attention.” In that moment he had his hands bound and was unable to do anything, his heart was angered and he was unable to hold back. “If there is not much difference between anything, then there is not much difference between the Empress and Empress Duan Jing, why do you have to leave home?” he blurted.

Xing Chi suddenly sprang up. “You … what did you say?” he asked in trembling voice.

As soon as he blurted out, Wei Xiaobao had already regretted it. Immediately he kowtowed and said, “Your servant is uttering nonsense, Old Emperor please do not get angry.”

Xing Chi said, “The matter of the past, I have already forgotten it. Why do you still use that kind of appellation? Please rise quickly, I have something I’d like to ask you.”

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied. He stood up, thinking, "I have succeeded in arousing your interest to talk, finally there is a little bit of progress."

"Where did you hear about the two Empresses from?" Xing Chi asked

"I heard it from Hai Dafu when he was talking to the Empress Dowager," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"You know Hai Dafu?" Xing Chi asked, "What happened to him?"

"He was killed by the Empress Dowager," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Xing Chi cried out in alarm. "He is dead?" he asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "The Empress Dowager killed him using the 'Transforming Bones Soft Palm' skill."

With a trembling voice Xing Chi said, "How can the Empress Dowager know ... know martial art? How did you know?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "Hai Dafu and the Empress Dowager fought in the garden at the Palace of Compassionate and Peace, I saw it with my own eyes."

"Who are you?" Xing Chi asked.

"Your servant is the Imperial Bodyguard Deputy Chief Wei Xiaobao," Wei Xiaobao replied, and then he immediately added, "Currently I am on mission, sent by His Majesty himself. Here is the imperial edict." While saying that, he presented the imperial note Kangxi wrote.

Xing Chi was staring blankly for a moment, he did not reach out to take the letter. Xing Dian said, "There has never been any lantern in here."

Xing Chi sighed. "Is the young emperor well?" he asked, "Is he ... is he happy being the emperor?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "As soon as the young emperor found out that the Old Emperor is still alive, he wished to grow wings and fly to Mount Wutai. In the Palace he wept and he cried, he was grieving but was also delighted, he wanted to go up the mountain, no matter what. But then ... but then he was afraid he might neglect the important matters of the imperial court, so he sent your servant to come first and pay his respect to the Old Emperor. As soon as your servant return and present the memorial to him, the young emperor will personally come here."

With a trembling voice Xing Chi said, "He ... he does not need to come. He is a good emperor, thinking about the important matters of the imperial court first, not like me ..." Speaking to this point, his voice turned into sobs.

In the darkness they could hear the sound of his tears dripping on the lapel of his outer garment. Hearing him expressing the father-son affection, Shuang'er felt the pit of her stomach ached, tears also streaming down her face.

Wei Xiaobao thought that he should not miss this golden opportunity, right now the Old Emperor's emotion was agitated, he would easily hear what Wei Xiaobao had to say. Thereupon Wei Xiaobao said, "Hai Dafu has investigated everything clearly. The Empress Dowager murdered Prince Rong first, then she murdered Empress Duan Jing, and Empress Duan Jing's *meizi* Consort Zhen. Afterwards she also murdered the young emperor's mama. Hai Dafu has investigated everything clearly. When the Empress Dowager knew that the secret has been divulged, she personally killed Hai Dafu. She also dispatched a large number of people to go up Mount Wutai to plot against the Old Emperor's life."

The fact that Prince Rong, Empress Duan Jing and Consort Zhen, three people were killed by a martial art expert, had been investigated clearly by Hai Dafu, and had been reported to Xing Chi; afterwards he returned to the palace to investigate the murderer. But no matter what, Xing Chi could not believe that it was the Empress Dowager herself who went into action; he sighed and said, "The Empress Dowager does not know martial art."

Wei Xiaobao said, "The Old Emperor would understand everything after listening to Empress Dowager and Hai Dafu's exchange that night." Thereupon he narrated in details the conversation between the two people that night at the garden. He was eloquent [orig. clever tooth sharp tooth]; although he was talking very fast, each word was very clear.

Xing Chi was originally a sentimental person, only because he was devotedly attached to imperial concubine Dong'e that after her death he did not even want to be the Emperor anymore, he

willingly abandoned his position of ten-thousand four-horse chariots and shut himself up in a small secluded room. Although he had practiced Zen meditation for several years, the shadow of imperial concubine Dong'e was etched very deep in his heart that as soon as he heard Wei Xiaobao mentioning her name, in an instant all meditation and Buddhism dharma were tossed away to the back of his mind. The exchange between Hai Dafu and the Empress Dowager flowed in his heart, grief and indignation met together, the flow of *chi* in the pit of his stomach was blocked, he felt as if he was about to explode.

Finished narrating, Wei Xiaobao added, "Since that old ... the Empress Dowager has started it, she will carry it through whatever happens; after she harms you, the Old Emperor, she will murder the young emperor. She also wants to dig Empress Duan Jing's grave and issue an imperial order throughout the land, to burn down the book 'Empress Duan Jing's Quotation'; she said that all those 'quotations' are a fart. Any family who possess a copy at home will be searched, their belongings confiscated, and they will be beheaded!" This last part was entirely his fabrication, but it just happened to touch the wound in Xing Chi's heart.

Xing Chi flew into rage, he slapped his own thigh forcefully and shouted, "That s1ut, I ... I should have deposed her early on. With her carry on like this, it just brings disaster!"

In the past, Shunzhi wholeheartedly wanted to depose the Empress and established imperial concubine Dong'e to be the Empress; it was only because the Empress Dowager blocked him that he relented. If the imperial concubine Dong'e did not die, sooner or later the Empress position would be hers.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Old Emperor, you can see through the world's affair, there is no difference between life and death, the young emperor must not be allowed to die, Empress Duan Jing's grave must not be excavated, the 'Empress Duan Jing's

Quotations' must not be destroyed."

"Correct," Xing Chi said, "You are absolutely correct."

Wei Xiaobao said, "Therefore, we must go into hiding to avoid falling into the Empress Dowager's evil scheme. The first step in Empress Dowager's strategy is murdering you, the second step is murdering the young emperor, the third step is digging the grave and burn the 'Quotations'. As long as the first step is unsuccessful, she would not dare to execute the second step, the third step."

Shunzhi ascended the throne when he was seven, and left home to become Buddhist monk when he was twenty-four. By this time he was only in his thirties. His natural disposition was hot-tempered, his character fiery; in term of sensibility, although very young, Kangxi was ten times better than his father, consequently, when the Mu Palace people trying to frame Wu Sangui, Kangxi was able to see through their crafty scheme. Wei Xiaobao was telling him half truth and half lies, with a lot of fabrication in his speech, but Xing Chi accepted everything as the truth. However, although Wei Xiaobao fabricated the story about the Empress Dowager's three steps, he was a disciple of the marketplace, his way of thinking was about the same as that of an insidious woman.

In a loud voice Xing Chi said, "Luckily you lay everything bare in a few words, otherwise the important matter will be spoiled. *Shidi*, we must leave immediately."

"Yes," Xing Dian replied. With his right hand he picked up the golden pestle, with his left hand he pushed the door leaf open.

As the door opened, they saw a shadow standing on the doorway. Xing Dian was unable to see his appearance in the dark. "Who is it?" he shouted, while lifting up his golden pestle.

That man said, "Where are you two going?"

Xing Dian was shocked; he threw away the golden pestle, put

his palms together and called out, "Shifu!"

Xing Chi also called out, "Shifu!"

Turned out it was none other than Yulin. He slowly said, "I have heard everything you said."

"Damn it," Wei Xiaobao cried out in his heart, "Things have turned to the worse!"

Yulin said in deep voice, "The worldly enmity leading to sin must be resolved, by blindly avoiding it, in the end you won't achieve anything. The cause will produce the result, which you must bear for as long as you live."

Xing Chi prostrated himself to the ground, saying, "Shifu's instruction is very true, disciple understands."

"I am afraid your understanding is not deep enough," Yulin said, "Your former wife wants to find you, let her come to find you. Our Buddha shows mercy to all living beings; she blamed you, she hated you, she wanted to kill you, you must resign yourself to her, you must introspect yourself instead, inevitably there must be something that made her blame you, hate you, a strong reason why she is determined to kill you. You try to avoid her, the karma remains. If you send someone to kill her, your evil karma will be even more grave."

"Yes," Xing Chi replied with a trembling voice.

Wei Xiaobao cursed in his belly, "F*ck your old bald thief's granny! I want to curse you, beat you, kill you, I want to see if you'll let me beat and curse you, I want to see if you'll let me cut your bald head?"

He heard Yulin continued, "As for Tibetan lamas wanted to capture you, it was they who commit evil karma, they want to use you as a hostage to force the current emperor into submission, to go on the rampage by ignoring the law, oppressing and doing harm to common people. We must not let

them have their outrageous way. For the time being, you cannot live here, you must come with me to the little temple at the back." He turned around and left. Xing Chi and Xing Dian immediately followed him.

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Although the young emperor bestowed me the Yellow Magua, I have never worn it for even one day. If I cannot complete this mission, when I return to Beijing, I won't be able to answer the young emperor. In his anger, he might go back on his promise and thus won't bestow the Yellow Magua to me. I'd better follow them and take a look." Thereupon he and Shuang'er followed to Yulin's little meditation temple.

Yulin acted as if he did not even see these two people; ignoring them completely, he went straight to the *putuan* and sat cross-legged. Xing Chi also sat down on the *putuan* next to him. Xing Dian glanced around, and then sat down on the *putuan* slightly lower than Xing Chi's. Yulin and Xing Chi put their palms together and closed their eyes, sitting motionless. Xing Dian, however, opened his round eyes wide, staring at the empty space. Finally he also closed his eyes, his hands resting on his knees. After a while, he reached out to touch the golden pestle by the *putuan*, afraid that he might lose it.

Wei Xiaobao made a face toward Shuang'er, and then with exaggerated movement he also sat down on the *putuan*, Shuang'er also sat down close to him. Although Wei Xiaobao was not Sun Wukong, he had always been an active and restless boy, just like real monkey. If he was asked to sit still on the *putuan* for three quarters of an hour to an hour, it would be the same as asking for his life. But since the Old Emperor was sitting by his side, he was unwilling to leave the temple, no matter what. He twisted to the east, skewed to the west, pulling Shuang'er's hand, tickling the palm of her hand. With great difficulty Shuang'er resisted the urge to laugh, with her left hand she pointed to Yulin and Xing Chi.

After enduring this for about an hour, Wei Xiaobao suddenly had a thought, "Even if he is learning to be a monk, the Old Emperor can't possibly resist the need to pee and poo. When he is going out to pee or poo, I will use graceful words, flowery speech to trick him into escaping." Having had this idea, his body calmed down somewhat.

In the quiet night, suddenly they heard footsteps of a lot of people in the distance. At first the sound was faint, but later on the footsteps were getting nearer and nearer, a large crowd of people were rushing toward Qing Liang Temple. The muscles on Xing Dian's face twitched several times, he reached out to grab the golden pestle. Opening up his eyes, he saw Yulin and Xing Chi were still sitting motionless. He hesitated for a moment, and then he put down the golden pestle, and closed his eyes again.

They heard the crowd burst into Qing Liang Temple and the continuous sound of people yelling and shouting. Wei Xiaobao thought, "When they fail to find the Old Emperor in the temple, can't they come here to look for him? I want to see how you, the old bald thief, are going to stop them."

Sure enough, approximately one hour later, a large group of people swarmed toward the back of the mountain, and arrived outside the little temple. Someone called out, "Go in and search!"

Xing Dian suddenly sprang up, grabbed his golden pestle, and stood on the vihara's doorway. Wei Xiaobao went to the window and peeked outside. Under the moonlight he saw a dense mass of heads. Turning his head around, he saw Yulin and Xing Chi were still sitting motionless. Shuang'er quietly said, "What should we do?"

Wei Xiaobao replied in low voice, "When those people rush in, we'll save the Old Emperor, and go out from the back door." After a short pause, he continued, "If along the way we get separated, we'll meet again at Ling Jing Temple."

Shuang'er nodded and said, "I am only afraid I can't carry the Old ... the Old Emperor."

"We might have to drag him away," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Suddenly the people outside shouted one after another, "Who's there randomly breaking through here?" "Grab them!" "Don't let them in!" "Damn it, get them!"

Shadows of people flashed, two men entered the door, swept past Xing Dian's body. They put their palms together toward Yulin, and then sat cross-legged on the floor. Turned out they were monks wearing gray robes. The door to this vihara was actually narrow, plus Xing Dian's bulky body was blocking it, there was really no gap between Xing Dian and the door, yet these two monks lightly and easily slipped through and came in, it seemed that they did not even touch Xing Dian's clothes. Indeed, nobody knew how these two entered the room.

Outside, the people were shouting again, "Someone is coming!" "Stop him!" "Get him!" But they heard a series of 'bang! bang! bang!' noise, some people flew out and fell to the ground. Two more monks entered the room. Without saying anything, they sat down a little bit lower than the two monks who came in first. In this way, pair by pair, several monks successively entered the room.

Wei Xiaobao was amused, he wondered how many more monks would come in; if several more pairs came, very soon there would not be enough room to sit in that meditation room. But after the ninth pair, no more monks came in. To his surprise, one of the ninth pair of monks was the Qing Liang Temple's Abbot Cheng Guang. Wei Xiaobao was baffled, but was grateful at the same time. "If these seventeen monks' martial art skill is more or less the same as Cheng Guang's, we don't have to fear even if more enemies were coming," he mused.

Outside, the people were still making a lot of noise, but

nobody dared to rush in. After a while, an old-sounding voice said, loud and clear, "Since Shaolin Temple is determined to stand up for Qing Liang Temple, are you going to take the responsibility over this matter on your own heads too?" In the meditation room, nobody answered.

After another moment, the old man outside said again, "Very well, since they have showed off the faces of Shaolin Temple's Eighteen Luohan, we'd better leave!" Shouts and yells outside repeated continuously, everybody withdrew down the mountain.

Wei Xiaobao sized up the eighteen monks; the old ones were approximately sixty, seventy years old, the young ones were approximately in their thirties, some were tall, some were short, some were handsome, some were ugly. Their Buddhist robes were bulging, apparently they all carried weapons. "They are the Shaolin Temple's Eighteen Luohan," he thought, "In that case, Abbot Cheng Guang is also one of the Eighteen Luohan. The old bald thief Yulin is secure in the knowledge that he has a strong backing, turns out he had early on arranged these formidable helpers to escort the Emperor. These monks are meditating in here, I don't know until when they are going to do this. *Laozi* cannot waste my time with them, sitting here for nothing. Wei Xiaobao must not sit here until he turns into Wei Laobao[88]!"

Standing up, he went to Xing Chi and knelt down in his presence, saying, "Great Monk, with the Shaolin Temple's Eighteen Luohan escorting your holy self, you, the Great Monk, is as safe and unmovable as Mount Tai. I am prepared to go back, I wonder if you, Senior, have any instruction?"

Xing Chi opened his eyes; he smiled and said, "Thank you for your trouble. Go back and tell your master: he does not need to go up Mount Wutai and disturb my peaceful meditation. Even if he is here, definitely I won't meet him. Tell him this: if he wants

the whole world at peace, 'never raise taxes', these four words [yong bu jia fu] should be firmly planted in his mind. If he can accomplish these four words, it is good enough for me, my heart will be happy."

"Yes!' Wei Xiaobao replied.

Xing Chi reached into his bosom and took out a very small bundle, he said, "Give this copy of scripture to your master. Tell him: in the matters of the world, he must let nature take its course, nothing can be forced. It would be best if he could benefit the common people of the Central Plains. But if the common people wanted us to leave, then from the place we came, there we should come back to." While saying that, he lightly patted the little bundle.

Wei Xiaobao recalled what Tao Hongying had told him; he mused, "Could it be that this is another copy of the Forty-two Chapter Sutra?" Seeing Xing Chi was handing him the bundle over, he reached out and received it with both hands.

After being silent for half a day, Xing Chi said, "You may go!"

"Yes!" Wei Xiaobao said. He crawled down and kowtowed.

"I do not dare," Xing Chi said, "Benefactor, please rise."

Wei Xiaobao stood up and walked toward the door. Suddenly his mischief arose, he turned his head toward Yulin and said, "Old monk, you have sat for a long time, don't you need to pee?" Yulin acted as if he did not hear anything. Wei Xiaobao giggled, and took a step over the threshold.

Xing Chi said, "Tell your master, even if his mother is at fault, she will always be his mother, he must not fail to observe etiquette, he also must not harbor grudge toward her."

Wei Xiaobao turned around to respond, but in his heart he said, "I am not going to pass on this words of yours."

Xing Chi said, as if he was muttering to himself, "Tell your

master to be careful in everything."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Back at the Ling Jing Temple, Wei Xiaobao closed the door and opened the bundle. As expected, it was the Forty-two Chapter Sutra, only the envelope was made of yellow silk. He pondered over what Xing Chi had said, and thought that it corresponds with what Tao Hongying had told him. Xing Chi said, 'If the common people wanted us to leave, then from the place we came, there we should come back to.' From outside the mountain pass Manchu people came to the Central Plains; if they want to return, naturally they should go back outside the pass. Xing Chi patted the little package once, obviously he was saying that when the Manchus go back, they could rely on this little package to live their lives. Wei Xiaobao also thought, "The Old Emperor told me to give this sutra to Xiao Xuanzi, should I give it to him or not? I have already had five copies in my hands, with this one, altogether I have six. Of the eight copies, I only short two. If I give this to Xiao Xuanzi, I am afraid the five copies I have will be quite useless. Luckily he did say that even if Xiao Xuanzi goes up Mount Wutai, he won't meet him; dead men tell no tales. This is a good thing dropped in front of my door, if I don't embezzle it, I am letting my Wei family's ancestors down." But then he thought about how the young emperor had complete confidence in him, embezzling his stuff means he was unworthy to be his friend, that he was being tactless and impulsive toward a friend, not the character of a hero or a warrior. Besides, even if he embezzled the book, he could not read it anyway, so giving it to a good friend seemed to be the right thing to do.

By daybreak the next morning, Wei Xiaobao led Shuang'er, Yu Ba, and their retinue going down the mountain. In going to Mount Wutai this time, he managed to see the Old Emperor, and thus achieved the mission Kangxi entrusted to him. Along the

way, he acquired Shuang'er, such a good-looking, tender girl [or servant girl] with superior martial art skill; his heart was very happy.

After walking for about a little over ten *li*, they saw a *toutuo* [see footnote 1 (on the title of this chapter)] coming from the opposite direction on the mountain road ahead. This *toutuo* was very tall, compared to that giant monk Xing Dian, it would be difficult to tell who was taller, but he was strangely very thin. Abbot Cheng Guang was already very thin, but this *toutuo* was at least half as thin as he. His face looked like skin wrapping a skull, his eyes were very deep, he really looked like a zombie. Perhaps it would take four of this *toutuo* combined to equal one Xing Dian. His long hair was draped across his shoulder, with a steel hoop on the top of his head to control his hair. He wore an oversized cloth robe, which was fluttering in the wind, as if it was hanging on a clothes-hanger.

Seeing this kind of appearance, Wei Xiaobao was rather scared, he did not dare to look too much, thus he turned his head away and evaded to the other side of the road, letting the *toutuo* walk pass. As the *toutuo* walked to him, he halted his steps and asked, “Did you come from Qing Liang Temple?”

“No,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “We came from Ling Jing Temple.”

The *toutuo* reached out with his left hand toward Wei Xiaobao’s left shoulder and turned his body around, so that Wei Xiaobao was face-to-face with him. “Are you the little eunuch Xiao Guizi from the Palace?” he asked.

His big hand pressed on Wei Xiaobao’s shoulder, immediately Wei Xiaobao felt his body went weak, he was unable to move a single step. “Rubbish!” he hastily said, “You think I look like an eunuch? I am Wei *Gongzi* [young master, son of nobility] of Yangzhou.”

“Let go of him quickly!” Shuang’er shouted, “How can you be

so rude to our family's Xianggong?"

The *toutuo* stretched out his right hand to press on Shuang'er's shoulder. "Listening to your voice, you must be a little eunuch too," he said.

Shuang'er dropped her right shoulder to dodge, her finger swiftly pointed toward his *tian huo* acupoint, 'plop' it hit right on target, but she felt as if her finger was touching am iron panel, her fingertip was in a lot of pain, even her finger was almost broken. "Ah!" she could not help but crying out. And then she felt her shoulder was in pain too, because the *toutuo*'s hand, which was as big as a palm-leaf fan, had grabbed her.

"Hey, hey, hey!" the *toutuo* laughed three times, before saying, "You, this little eunuch, has a very good martial art skill. Formidable, really formidable."

Shuang'er's left leg flew up, 'Bang!' it landed on his crotch; this time, she felt as if she was kicking a large rock. "Aiyo!" she cried out, tears flowed out of her eyes.

"Little eunuch has amazing martial art, really formidable," the *toutuo* said.

"I am not a little eunuch!" Shuang'er shouted, "You are the little eunuch! Aiyo!"

The *toutuo* laughed, "Do you think I look like a eunuch?" he asked.

"Let me go!" Shuang'er shouted, "If you don't, I am going to curse you."

The *toutuo* said, "You sealed my acupoint, you kicked my thigh, I am not afraid of you; do you think I will afraid your cussing? Your martial art skill is superior, you must be sent out from the Palace, I must search you."

"Your martial art skill is even higher," Wei Xiaobao said, "So you must be sent out from the Palace even more."

The *toutuo* said, “You, little eunuch, muddle things together." With left hand carrying Wei Xiaobao and right hand carrying Shuang’er, he rushed up the mountain as if he was flying. The two young people shouted and screaming, the *toutuo* did not pay any attention, he carried the two people as if they were nothing, his footsteps were very fast. Yu Ba and the others were dumbstruck, nobody dared to make any noise.

The *toutuo* rushed several *zhang* along the mountain path, suddenly he turned towards the hill; there was no real path there, but he tread on it as if treading on a plain ground. Wei Xiaobao felt the wind whistling past his ears; he thought, “This *toutuo* is very formidable, could it be he is a mountain god or some demon?”

After rushing for a while, the *toutuo* dropped the two people on the ground. He pointed up and said, “If you don’t tell me the truth, I am going to carry you to that mountain peak and toss you down.” What he was pointing at was a very high peak, the top of the peak is hidden in the clouds and mist.

“Alright,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I’ll tell you the truth.”

“If you are sensible,” the *toutuo* said, “Tell me truthfully, who are you? And who is this kid?”

“Dashi Fu [Great Master father],” Wei Xiaobao said, “She is not a kid, she … she is my … my …”

“Your what?” the *toutuo* asked.

“She is my … wife!” Wei Xiaobao said.

As soon as these two characters ‘wife’ [lao po] came out of his mouth, both the *toutuo* and Shuang’er were shocked. Shuang’er’s face blushed deep red. “What?” the *toutuo* asked in surprise, “What wife?”

“I am not concealing anything from Dashi Fu,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I am a young master of a rich family in Beijing, I fancied

this young lady of the family next door, thereupon … we privately agreed to marry each other in the back garden. His father did not agree, so I took her out and we ran away. Look at her, she is a girl, how can she be a little eunuch? You are really doing her injustice. If you don't believe me, take off her hat and look for yourself."

The *toutuo* took off Shuang'er's hat, exposing her long beautiful hair. At that time, in the whole of China, other than monks, Taoists, *toutuo*, nuns and people who had left home, everybody must shave the half front part of their heads. Shuang'er's long hair rolled down, it hung down straight pass her shoulder, no doubt she was a woman.

"Dashi Fu," Wei Xiaobao said, "I am begging you, if you hand us over to the government authority, I will lose my life. I'll give you a thousand *taels*, just let us go!"

"In that case," the *toutuo* said, "You really are not an eunuch; which eunuch would take other family's girl to elope together? Humph, humph, you are very young, but your courage is indeed not small." While saying that, he let him go. He also asked, "What are you doing going up Mount Wutai?"

Wei Xiaobao replied, "We are going up Mount Wutai to worship Buddha, to ask Bodhisattva to bless and protect us, to let me escape difficulties and become the *zhuangyuan*, in the future she … my wife, will become a real Madame." All these 'privately agreed to marry each other in the back garden' and 'escape difficulties and become the *zhuangyuan*' and so on he heard from the storytellers when he was still in Yangzhou.

The *toutuo* thought for a moment, he nodded his head and said, "So I mistook you for someone else. You may go!"

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, "Thank you Dashi," he said, "When we worship Bodhisattva later, we will ask Bodhisattva to bless and protect you, bless and protect Dashi

that in the future … you will also be a great Bodhisattva, that you will rise and sit on the same level with Wenshu Pusa [Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of keen awareness] and Guanyin Pusa [Bodhisattva of Compassion].” Taking Shuang’er’s hand along, they walked down the mountain.

They only walked for several when the *toutuo* said, “Something’s not right, come back here! Little miss, your martial art skill is amazing, you sealed my acupoint, you kicked me.” While saying that, he rubbed the *tian huo* acupoint on his waist, and then he asked, “Who taught you martial art? Which school do you belong to?”

Shuang’er could not lie, she blushed and shook her head. Wei Xiaobao said, “Her martial art skill is handed down in a family, it was her mama who taught her.”

“Little miss, what’s your surname?” the *toutuo* asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “This, hee hee … it’s rather inconvenient to say.”

“What do you mean inconvenient?” the *toutuo* said, “Tell me quick!”

“Our surname is Zhuang,” Shuang’er said.

The *toutuo* shook his head. “Surname Zhuang?” he said, “That’s not right, you lie to me. There is no such martial art expert among those with surname Zhuang in the world, who can teach a girl with such martial art skill.”

Wei Xiaobao said, “There are extremely many people with good martial art skill in the world, how can you know?”

“I was asking this little miss,” the *toutuo* angrily said, “Don’t interrupt.” While saying that, he pushed lightly on Wei Xiaobao’s shoulder.

This push was very light, for fear that this youngster could not stand it. When his palm touched Wei Xiaobao's shoulder, he felt

Wei Xiaobao easily evaded it. Although his movement was without any strength, the style he used was the move 'grass stooping down by the wind'; where the shoulder turned around, left palm protecting the face and the right palm ready to strike down, actually it was somewhat similar to the *toutuo*'s own school.

The *toutuo* was surprised, he tried to grab Wei Xiaobao's chest. Wei Xiaobao sent out a right palm stab with the move 'spirit snake went out of its hole'; the execution was not the least bit inaccurate. 'Plop!' it hit the *toutuo*'s neck. But Wei Xiaobao felt like his fingers were stabbing an iron panel. "Aiyo!" he cried out in pain.

Shuang'er's pair of palms fluttered in the air to attack the *toutuo*. The *toutuo* concentrated his strength at the center of his palm and sealed the acupoint on Wei Xiaobao's chest before turning around to face her. Shuang'er leaped high and crouched low, her movements were light and graceful, but after seven, eight moves, the *toutuo*'s two hands managed to catch her arms. With his left elbow he struck her acupoint to immobilize her, and then he turned around and asked Wei Xiaobao, "You said you are a young master of a rich family; how do you know the *qin na* [grappling technique] of Shen Long Dao [divine dragon island] of Liao Dong peninsula?"

"I am a young master of a rich family," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Why can't I know the martial art of Shen Long Island of Liao Dong peninsula? Are you saying that this skill is supposed to be known by only kids from poor family?" While his mouth was uttering whatever he could come up with to buy some time, his mind was racing, "What kind of martial art is the Shen Long Island of Liao Dong peninsula's martial art? Ah, right, the old turtle Hai said that the old whore impersonated Wudang Pai's martial art, but actually it was the Snake Island of Liao Dong peninsula's martial art. That Shen Long Island is most likely the

same as the Snake Island. That's right, the old whore is in cahoots with Shen Long Jiao people, they must dislike the name 'snake' and thus changed it to 'divine dragon'. Xiao Xuanzi's martial art skill was taught by the old whore, and I often had martial art match with him, unconsciously I learned these several *qin na* techniques."

"Rubbish!" the *toutuo* said, "Who is your Shifu?"

Wei Xiaobao thought, "If I say I was taught by the old whore, it's the same as admitting that I am a little eunuch from the Palace." Thereupon he said, "It was my *Shushu*'s [younger uncle] good acquaintance, a fat lady, Liu Yan *Gugu* who taught me."

The *toutuo* was greatly surprised. "Liu Yan?" he asked, "Miss Liu is your *Shushu*'s good acquaintance? Who is your *Shushu*?"

"My *Shushu* is Wei Dabao [da - big]," Wei Xiaobao [xiao - little] replied, "He is Beijing's well-known distinguished and accomplished young master, each time he spends money, it would be a thousand *taels*, his appearance looks like an actor on the stage. That fat lady was enchanted by him as soon as she saw him. The fat lady oftentimes came to my house in the depth of the night, jumping over the wall of our flower garden. I nagged her to teach me martial art, and so she taught me these several moves."

Half believing and half doubting, the *toutuo* asked, "Does your *Shushu* know martial art?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed aloud and said, "Does he know farting martial art? He often gets his neck grabbed by Miss Liu Yan, who lifted him up back and forth, without him being able to move the least bit. My *Shushu* became anxious and cursed her, 'The child is lifting the father'. Liu Yan *Gugu* laughed and said, 'It's only the child lifting the father, even if the child is lifting the grandfather, it is still not a big deal'."

He was cursing the *toutuo* in a roundabout way, but the *toutuo* did not realize it the least bit; he asked in detail about Liu Yan's appearance, which, surprisingly, Wei Xiaobao was able to explain without the slightest mistake. Wei Xiaobao said, "This fat *Gugu* loves to wear red embroidered shoes. *Dashi Fu*, I am guessing that you are in love with her, are you not? When you see her, take her to sleep with you, it would be best if you could sleep with her and would not wake up forever." How would the *toutuo* know that Liu Yan had already died? On the surface it sounded like Wei Xiaobao was babbling nonsense, while actually he was cursing him with the most poisonous curse.

The *toutuo* angrily said, "Little child should not talk nonsense!" But he actually believed him. He reached out toward Wei Xiaobao's lower abdomen and patted it lightly, to unseal his acupoint. Unexpectedly his hand touched the Forty-two-chapter Sutra in Wei Xiaobao's bosom, when he patted, the acupoint was not opened. "What is that?" the *toutuo* asked.

"It's a big stack of banknotes I stole from home," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"Braggart!" the *toutuo* said, "How can there be that many banknotes?" Reaching into Wei Xiaobao's pocket, he groped around and took the package out. When he untied the package, to his utter amazement, he found a sutra. He was dumbstruck for a moment, and then his face showed utter delight. "Forty-two-chapter Sutra! Forty-two-chapter Sutra!" he called out. Hastily he wrapped it back and put it inside his own pocket. Grabbing Wei Xiaobao by the chest, he raised him high and in a stern voice asked, "Where did you get it from?"

This question was not easy to answer, Wei Xiaobao laughed. "Tee hee ... hee ... are you asking me? It's complicated and not easy to explain succinctly; I won't be able to tell you everything just in this short moment." He was stalling, while trying to think about some 'covering the sky and seamless clouds' story to

swindle this *toutuo*. Naturally to make up some wild story about where the sutra came from was extremely easy, but now that the book had fallen into the *toutuo*'s hand, to deceive him into handing it back would be extremely difficult.

The *toutuo* said in a loud voice, "Who gave it to you?"

Wei Xiaobao's body was hanging in the air, he suddenly saw seven, eight monks in grey robes on the hillside coming toward them. From their appearance, he knew they were the Eighteen Luohan of Shaolin whom he had seen at the small vihara behind the Qing Liang Temple. Turning his head around, he saw several more monks, together with several monks coming up from the western hillside, there were a total of seventeen, eighteen monks. He was delighted and said in his heart, "Thief *toutuo*, even if your martial art skill is stronger, you are no match for the Eighteen Luohan of Shaolin."

"Tell me quick, tell me quick!" the *toutuo* said. Noticing that Wei Xiaobao was glancing to the east and looking to the west, he followed his gaze and saw on the hillside to the east, north and west, three directions more than a dozen monks were slowly coming up, but he was unconcerned at all. “What do those monks come here for?” he asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, “They heard *Dashi Fu*’s martial art skill is superior, they are full of admiration, hence they come here to take you as their master.”

The *toutuo* shook his head and said, “I have never received any disciple.” Raising his voice, he called out, “Hey, get the hell out of here quickly, don’t come here to make trouble!” His shout echoed from the mountains on all sides, showing off his astonishing might.

The eighteen monks did not seem to hear, they continued going

up the mountain. An old monk with long eyebrows put his palms together and said, "*Dashi*, are you the Fat Revered Monk[89] of Liaodong?"

Wei Xiaobao was still hanging midair, hearing the question, he could not help but burst out laughing. This *toutuo* was so thin that he was a rarity in the world, yet the old monk asked if he was the Fat Revered Monk; Wei Xiaobao thought that he was ridiculing him.

To his surprise, the *toutuo* replied in loud voice, "I am indeed Fat Toutuo! Are you all here to take me as your master? I don't accept any disciple! Whom have you studied martial art with?"

The old monk replied, "*Lao Na* is Cheng Xin of Shaolin Temple, the humble head of Damo Hall. These are my seventeen *Shidi*, all are my companions in the Damo Hall."

"Ah!" Fat Toutuo exclaimed, he slowly let Wei Xiaobao down. "Turns out all eighteen luohan of Shaolin Temple's Damo Hall are here. So you are not here to take me as your master. I am alone cannot beat all of you."

Cheng Xin put his palms together and said, "We have neither grievance nor enmity with you, we are all followers of Buddha, how could you talk about this character 'to beat'? Luohan [Arhat] are the sages of Buddhism, we are merely ordinary folks, how can we dare to receive this appellation? Wulin friends carelessly address us with this honorary title, we really do not deserve it. The Fat and Thin Revered Monks of Liaodong's remarkable feats are without rival, we have always admired you. Today we are brought together by fate, indeed it is our great good fortune." Speaking to this point, the other seventeen monks put their palms together to salute.

Fat Toutuo bowed to return the salute; without straightening up his body, he asked, “You are all coming to Mount Wutai, what's the purpose of your trip?"

Pointing to Wei Xiaobao, Cheng Xin said, "This young benefactor has some relationship with our Shaolin Temple, I am asking *Dashi* to raise your hand and let him go down the mountain."

Fat Toutuo hesitated; he saw the opponent had many men and greater force, he knew that each one of the eighteen luohan of Shaolin had astonishing martial art skill, he did not give the slightest care of fighting one on one, but he would not be able to deal with all eighteen of them. Thereupon he said, "Very well, looking at *Dashi*'s face, I'll let him go." Finished speaking, he leaned over and massaged Wei Xiaobao's lower abdomen several times to unseal his acupoint.

As soon as Wei Xiaobao was able to stand, he held out his right palm and said, "The sutra was given to me by a friend of these eighteen luohan, who asked me to deliver it to ... to Shaolin Temple and hand it over to the head monk Abbot. Would you return it to me?"

"What?" Fat Toutuo angrily said, "What does this sutra have to do with Shaolin Temple?"

With a loud voice Wei Xiaobao said, "You seized the sutra away from me, it was the old monk who ask me to deliver it to someone else, it is extremely important, quickly give it back to me!"

"Rubbish!" Fat Toutuo said. Turning around, he leaped down from the northern slope of the mountain. Three Shaolin monks immediately flew and reached out to grab his arm, Fat Toutuo did not dare to fight the monks, he sidestepped to evade the

three monks' grabbing palm. His stature was very tall, yet his movement was incomparably agile.

In this grabbing movement, the three monks of Shaolin had used top-notch technique of Shaolin martial arts, unexpectedly they failed to even touch his clothes. But in the instant Fat Toutuo's movement was slowed down, four more Shaolin monks had blocked behind his back, eight palms crisscrossed, closing his escape route.

Fat Toutuo let out a loud bellow, his palms pushed out using the move 'five nails cut into the mountain'. Borrowing the momentum of this overwhelming force, he turned around and swiftly fled southward. The four Shaolin monks pushed put their palms together from left and right. Fat Toutuo's palm force collided with the four monks. He felt the palm strike from the left side was hard and stiff, while the palm strike of other two monks from the right was soft and continuously flowing; he could not help but was greatly shocked. Sending out all his power to his palms, he was barely able to resist the opposing force. Right this time, from behind him three claws were coming toward his back.

Fat Toutuo took a quick glance and saw the two monks on his left sending out their punches, instantly his feet kicked the ground and he flew upward; but the extended palms of the three monks behind him were not the same, they were using 'dragon claw', 'tiger claw' and 'eagle claw' styles, respectively, he was intimidated inwardly. Coiling his large sleeve, he created a gust of strong wind, as soon as his left foot landed on the ground, his right hand grabbed Wei Xiaobao. "Do you want him to die, or do you want him to live?" he called out.

Some of the eighteen Shaolin monks advancing, some retreating, they formed two circles, surrounding Fat Toutuo in the middle. Cheng Xin said, "The sutra of this young benefactor is very important, I am asking *Dashi* to please return it, and

thus binding good karma. We will be deeply grateful."

With right hand lifting Wei Xiaobao high in the air and left palm pressing the crown of his head, Fat Toutuo walked southwards in big strides. The situation was clear: if the Shaolin monks put forth their hands to block him, he would slightly exert some strength on his left palm, Wei Xiaobao's skull would be crushed immediately.

The several Shaolin monks blocking on the south hesitated. They could only chant 'Amitabha Buddha' and stepped aside to let him through. Carrying Wei Xiaobao, Fat Toutuo dashed to the south, he went faster and faster. The eighteen luohan of Shaolin Temple unleashed their *qing gong* to follow him closely.

By this time, Shuang'er's sealed acupoint had been unsealed by the Shaolin monks. Seeing Wei Xiaobao was captured, she was alarmed and frightened, and immediately raised her *chi* to pursue. Since her punching and kicking skill was taught by an expert, her martial art was quite amazing, but she was still very young, her internal energy cultivation differed too far from those Shaolin monks, plus her stature was small, her steps short, in just one or two *li*, she had already fallen behind. In her distress, she broke up crying, but she did not stop running after them. Although Fat Toutuo was carrying a person, his speed did not diminished at all, unexpectedly the Shaolin monks were not able to catch on.

After running for a while, still carrying Wei Xiaobao, Fat Toutuo dashed toward a mountain peak directly south of them. The eighteen Shaolin monks ran after him in single file. Shuang'er followed to the foot of the peak and she was already out of breath. Looking up, she saw the peak was very high; she thought that the evil *toutuo* took her *xianggong* to the top of the mountain peak, there was a one in ten thousand chance that he would take a wrong step and fall down. The evil *toutuo* may not necessarily die, but how could *xianggong* be alive?

While she was having this frightening thought, suddenly she heard loud rumbling noise as pieces of big rocks rolled down the mountain path. The eighteen Shaolin monks leaped to the left and jumped to the right, continuously dodging the rocks. What happened was that as Fat Toutuo reached the peak, he continuously kicked the rocks along the path so that the rocks rolled down to block the enemy. How could the eighteen Shaolin monks let the rocks smash them? However, the distance between them widened considerably.

When battling Huangfu Ge, Abbot Cheng Guang had received injury on the pit of his stomach, his internal energy was adversely affected, he fell behind the seventeenth monk. Shuang'er struggled hard to pursue to the peak, she called out, "*Fangzhang Dashi, Fangzhang Dashi*!"

Cheng Guang turned his head around and stopped to wait for her. Seeing her rushing while gasping for breath, and with frightened expression on her face, he consoled her by saying, "Don't be afraid! He won't harm your master [orig. gongzi]." Afraid that she might hurt herself by rushing like that, he took her hand and together they slowly walked up the mountain.

Shuang'er's heart was somewhat comforted; she asked, "Abbot, he ... can he possibly harm *Xianggong*?"

"He can't," Cheng Guang replied. Although his mouth said so, seeing Fat Toutuo was so vicious, how could he ascertain that?

This mountain peak was Mount Wutai's southern platform [reminder: wutai means five platforms], luckily it was a winding mountain path, with a lot of twists and turns, after several turns, the rocks Fat Toutuo kicked were no longer a threat to them. By the time Cheng Guang and Shuang'er reached the Southern Platform Peak, they saw seventeen Shaolin monks were surrounding a temple; naturally Fat Toutuo and Wei Xiaobao were inside the temple.

Altogether Mount Wutai has five mountain peaks, on each peak there was a temple. Mount Wutai was a Buddhist mountain dedicated to the teaching of Manjushri, each temple on the peak was dedicated to the different title of Manjushri, according to Manjushri's vast divine power, and according to the different era that he appeared in the flesh. The Eastern Platform was called Wang Hai Peak, the temple built on the peak was the Wang Hai Temple [lit. facing the ocean], dedicated to the intelligence of Manjushri. On the Northern Platform's Ye Dou[90] Peak, there was Ling Ying Temple [spiritual response], dedicated to 'without disgrace' of Manjushri. On the Central Platform's Cui Yan [azure cliff] Peak, there was Yan Jiao Temple [practicing religion], dedicated to scholarly boy Manjushri. On the Western Platform's Gua Yue [hanging moon] Peak, the Fa Lei Temple [thundering Buddhist teaching] built there was dedicated to the lion-like character of Manjushri. On the Southern Platform's Jin Xiu [beautiful] Peak, the Pu Ji Temple [universal relief] constructed there was dedicated to the wisdom of Manjushri. [Translator's note: my apology for being unfamiliar with Buddhist teaching, and thus the translation might be inaccurate. I simply translated the words literally, if any of you have better idea, feel free to suggest correction.]

These people happened to be on the Jin Xiu Peak, and that temple was the Pu Ji Temple. Shuang'er called out several times, "*Xianggong*, *Xianggong*!" But there was no reply. Lifting up her feet, she rushed into the temple.

Shuang'er dashed straight toward the main hall and saw Fat Toutuo was standing by the mouth of the water drainage from the eaves of the Hall of Great Strength, his right hand was still clutching Wei Xiaobao. Shuang'er rushed over can called out, "*Xianggong*, did the evil monk hurt you?"

"Don't worry," Wei Xiaobao replied, "He will not dare to harm me."

Fat Toutuo angrily said, "Why won't I dare to harm you?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed, "If you harm a single strand of my hair, the eighteen luohan of Shaolin will catch you, and will change you back to your original state; you will turn back into a short and fat man, then you will be really bad."

Fat Toutuo's countenance changed greatly; with a trembling voice he said, "What do you mean change me back to my original state? You ... you ... how did you know?"

Actually, Wei Xiaobao did not have the slightest idea, he was only thinking that his stature was tall and thin, but he was called the 'Fat Toutuo', so he was just speaking thoughtlessly, without any reason whatsoever. Unexpectedly, he seemed to hit the *toutuo*'s sore spot.

Wei Xiaobao was able to see the change in the *toutuo*'s countenance, and hear the fright in his voice; immediately he laughed coldly, "Hey, hey, naturally I know," he said.

"They don't have that ability," Fat Toutuo said. Suddenly his right foot flew up, 'Bang!' he kicked the stone drum in front of the steps that it crashed onto the screen wall across the gate. Fragments of rocks swirl in the air. He turned to Shuang'er and asked, "What are you doing here? Are you bored of being alive?"

Shuang'er said, "*Xianggong* and I will live together and die together; if you harm just half a part of him, I will fight you to the death."

"Damn it," Fat Toutuo angrily said, "What's so good about this little demon? Are you, the little baby girl, in love with him?"

Shuang'er blushed, she could not answer the question. "*Xianggong* is a good man," she said, "You are a wicked man."

They heard the eighteen Shaolin monks outside chanted the name of Buddha together, "Amitabha Buddha, Amitabha

Buddha! Fat Reverend Monk, please release the young benefactor and return the sutra to him! You are an outstanding and famous hero and warrior of the Wulin world, yet you are making things difficult for a little child, won't you be the laughingstock of the people of the world?"

Fat Toutuo roared, "If you keep babbling nonsense, *Laozi* will not be polite anymore. We will all break up with one strike, *laozi* will kill this little child and destroy the sutra, I want to see what are you going to do about it?"

Cheng Xin said, "Fat Reverend Monk, what do you want so that you will be willing to release him and return the sutra?"

"Release him is still possible," Fat Toutuo said, "But no matter what, I won't return the sutra." The monks outside fell silent.

Fat Toutuo looked around the main hall, looking for a way to escape. Suddenly grey shadows flashed, the eighteen Shaolin monks flew into the hall. Keeping close to the left wall, five Shaolin monks circled around to his back. Keeping close to the left wall, five Shaolin monks circled around to his back. In an instant he was surrounded again by the eighteen Shaolin monks.

Fat Toutuo angrily said, "If you have guts, let's fight one on one. You can try *Laozi*'s hands one by one, taking turn in fighting me, *laozi* won't care."

Cheng Xin put his palms together and said, "Please forgive our rudeness, we must fight you together."

Fat Toutuo raised his left foot and lightly stepped on Wei Xiaobao's head, while laughing coldly. Smelling the mud odor from the sole of his shoe, Wei Xiaobao was both frightened and angered; with the stinky shoe on his head, unexpectedly his brain also became muddled, in that instant he could not think of anything else. His eyes swept the hall randomly, trying to find something in that main hall with which he could provoke the

toutuo. He only needed to talk some nonsense to divert Fat Toutuo's attention, so that his concentration was somewhat broken, then the Shaolin monks would have the opportunity to help him. However, with his head underneath the *toutuo*'s foot, he could only look to one side of the courtyard outside. He saw a large stone turtle with a large vertical stone tablet on its back.

"Fat Reverend Monk," Wei Xiaobao said, "Your dad is always crawling in the courtyard, with a tens-of-thousands-catty large stone pressing on his back, isn't he suffering too much? You are not even trying to help him, you are really lacking of filial piety."

"What do you mean my dad is crawling in the courtyard?" Fat Toutuo angrily said, "Your mouth is full of rubbish."

Wei Xiaobao said, "That Forty-two-chapter Sutra, altogether there are eight copies, you only have one. Without obtaining the other seven copies, what good is the one you have?"

Fat Toutuo hastily asked, "Where are the other seven copies? Do you know?"

"Naturally I do," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"Where are they?" Fat Toutuo asked, "Tell me quickly, if you don't, I am going to crush your skull with my foot."

"At first I did not know, but I found out about it just now," Wei Xiaobao said.

"You have just found out about it?" Fat Toutuo asked in amazement, "What do you mean?"

Stretching out his neck, Wei Xiaobao looked at the stone tablet. The entire stone tablet was engraved with curvy seal-script characters, naturally Wei Xiaobao did not know it, he was just pretending to read aloud the inscription on the tablet. "The Forty-two-chapter Sutra," he slowly read, "Altogether there are eight copies. The first copy is hidden in some temple on some mountain in Henan province. I do not recognize those several

characters.”

“What characters?” Fat Toutuo asked. Seeing Wei Xiaobao was staring at the stone tablet in the courtyard, he asked in amazement, “You understand the inscription on that stone tablet?”

Wei Xiaobao did not pay him any attention, he read the inscription on the stone tablet with rapt attention, “The second copy is hidden in some Buddhist nun monastery on some mountain in Shanxi province. Pang Laoxiong [old fellow fat], I don’t recognize these several characters, the engraving is fuzzy, you are well-versed in both literature and martial art, why don’t you go and look at it yourself?”

Fat Toutuo believed him; he bent over to lift Wei Xiaobao up and brought him out of the hall’s door to look at the stone tablet. The writings on the stone tablet were actually in seal-script; if he said it was some writing, he himself did not recognize even a single character, but if he said it was not some writing, then what was engraved on the stone tablet?

He heard Wei Xiaobao continue reading, “The third copy is on some mountain in Sichuan? I don’t recognize that character either.”

Fat Toutuo had heard long ago that there were altogether eight copies of the Forty-two-chapter Sutra, and that one must have all eight copies to unleash their greatest usefulness. As for the location of the sutras, he did not have the slightest clue. Listening to Wei Xiaobao, he no longer had the slightest doubt; immediately he lifted up his foot and pulled him up and asked, “And where is the fourth copy?”

Wei Xiaobao squinted to gaze at the stone tablet, he leaned his head to the left, and then leaned it to the right, finally he shook his head and said, “I can’t figure it out.”

Fat Toutuo lifted him up and brought him three steps closer to

the stone tablet. When they were near, his face showed an inquiring expression. Wei Xiaobao said, “My head is so itchy.”

“What?” Fat Toutuo asked.

“There’s flea in this temple,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “It went into my hair and bit me. Pang Laoxiong, please catch the flea for me. My scalp is unbearably itchy, I cannot see clearly.”

Fat Toutuo took off his hat and stretched out his huge palm, and with his five as-big-as-wooden-club fingers he scratched Wei Xiaobao’s hair. “Is it better?” he asked.

“No,” Wei Xiaobao said, “The flea bit me on the left part of my scalp, you were scratching the right part; the more you scratched, the itchier it becomes.” Therefore, Fat Toutuo scratched the left part of his scalp. Wei Xiaobao said, “Aiyo, the flea jumped onto my neck, did you see it?”

Fat Toutuo was fully aware that he was being mischievous, but he still relaxed his hand holding Wei Xiaobao’s wrist; only he placed his left hand lightly on Wei Xiaobao’s shoulder to prevent him from running away. “Just scratch it yourself!” he said.

“Aiyo!” Wei Xiaobao said, “This granny’s flea is so difficult to deal with, it must have not eaten human’s blood in three years. Originally it was short and fat, and now it is so starved that it turns thin and shriveled, hence it came here staking everything it has to make things difficult for *laozi*.” While saying that, he reached into his collar with his left hand and scratched vigorously.

Fat Toutuo knew Wei Xiaobao was cursing him as a flea in a roundabout way, but he pretended not to notice. “Where is the fourth copy hidden at?” he asked.

“Um, the fourth copy,” Wei Xiaobao said, “It is hidden in some mountain, Shao … Shaolin Temple’s Da … Da something courtyard?”

Fat Toutuo was shocked. “It is hidden in Shaolin Temple’s Damo Courtyard?” he asked.

Seeing he was very afraid of the eighteen Shaolin monks, and knowing that these Shaolin monks were from Damo Courtyard, Wei Xiaobao deliberately came out with this difficult problem; he wanted to play trick on him, thinking that even if he had an enormous courage, he would not dare to go to Shaolin Temple’s Damo Courtyard to steal the sutra. “Is that the character ‘mo’?” Wei Xiaobao asked, “I did not know it. Pang Laoxiong, you even know this difficult character, why should you tell me to read? Ah, I know, you are simply testing me. I am ashamed, on each line, there are several characters that I do not recognize.”

Fat Toutuo cast a sidelong glance toward the Shaolin monks, his expression showed trepidation and uncertainty; he asked, “And where is the fifth copy hidden at?”

Shaolin Temple was a major sect of the Wulin world. Wei Xiaobao had heard Hai Dafu mentioning it, who had also mentioned that the Empress Dowager pretended to be from Wudang Pai. In turn, the Empress Dowager had thought that Hai Dafu was from Kongtong Pai. Therefore, Wudang and Kongtong were also two major sects. Thereupon he said that the fifth and sixth copies were hidden separately on Wudang and Kongtong, two mountains. Fat Toutuo’s countenance turned uglier and uglier. Wei Xiaobao said that the seventh copy was obtained by the Mu Palace people of Yunnan, and the eighth was in some Xi Wang’s [west king] mansion. Bai Hanfeng had given him some trouble, so he was trying to even up by mentioning the Mu Palace. In Wu Sangui, Ping Xi Wang’s palace, there were martial art experts as many as the clouds, even his own Shifu was afraid of it, if Fat Toutuo was brazen enough to cause trouble, he would definitely suffer an enormous suffering.

To his surprise, however, Fat Toutuo’s countenance changed greatly as he asked, “Did you say the eighth copy is in Ping Xi

Wang's mansion?"

"I do not know this character," Wei Xiaobao replied, "I am not sure if it is Ping Xi Wang."

Fat Toutuo was angry; suddenly he exploded, "Rubbish! If not a thousand years old, this stone tablet is at least five hundred years; how old is Wu Sangui? How can an inscription of several hundred years ago mention Ping Xi Wang Wu Sangui?"

The stone tablet was jet-black, the stone tortoise and the stone tablet were covered with moss, the engraved inscriptions were worn out and badly damaged; one look at it, one would immediately know that this article was a several hundred year old antique. Wei Xiaobao did not understand this logic and hence he made idle talk trying to implicate Wu Sangui.

"Bad, bad!" he groaned inwardly. Trying to recover from his blunder he said, "I said I do not know that character, it was you who said 'Ping Xi Wang', perhaps in ancient times there was a Gou Xi Wang, Mao Xi Wang or even Wugui[91] Xi Wang in Yunnan. Pang Laoxiong, let me tell you this: these characters are squiggly, they are very difficult to recognize. If you know it, then you know it, if you don't know it, then admit it. You pretend to know, yet you read something about Ping Xi Wang Wu Sangui. Here we have several great monks, each and every one of them is a man of learning and profound knowledge; you randomly read wrong characters, won't you make them laugh at you till their mouths crooked?"

This speech actually made sense, making Fat Toutuo's thin face immediately blushed deep red from ear to ear. He was not angry at all, but nodded his head and said, "I do not recognize even one word of these tadpole characters, so it is not Ping Xi Wang. What else is written below it?"

"What a close call!" Wei Xiaobao mused, "After rebuking him a little, I need to cover it up. I have to say a few nice things to

make him happy. He changed the ‘Snake Island’ to ‘Divine Dragon Island’; he also knew the fat pig Liu Yan, most probably he is a member of Shen Long Jiao.” After cocking his head and looking at the stone tablet for half a day, he said, “The following seems to say ‘long life as heaven … heaven … heaven …’ heaven what?”

Fat Toutuo immediately looked tense, “Look carefully,” he said, “Long life as heaven what?”

“It looks like the character … the character … um, character ‘qi’ [even/level with]. Right, it must be ‘long-life is the same as the Heaven's’!”

Fat Toutuo was greatly delighted, he repeatedly rubbed his hands and said, “This sentence does exist. And then what?”

Wei Xiaobao pointed to the stone tablet and said, “These characters are really squiggly, they are hard to recognize. Ah right, this must me ‘Hong’ character, ‘Hong Jiaozhu’, three characters, and then there’s ‘Shen Long’ two characters! Look here, these are ‘shen tong guang da’, four characters [magical power is extensive].”

“Wow!” Fat Toutuo exclaimed loudly, he jumped up and down and said, “Hong Jiaozhu really has such good fortune, his long-life is the same as the Heaven's? It is written on this thousand years old stone tablet?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “On top of that, it is written that this is … this is a monument established by Tang Taizong Li Shimin[92], who sent Qin Shubao, Cheng Yaojin to erect it. It is clearly written on this stone tablet that during the Tang Dynasty, there was a military master called Xu Maogong, who knew events that happened a thousand years before and a thousand years after, who foretold that after a thousand years, during the Great Qing Dynasty, there will be Hong Jiaozhu of Shen Long Jiao, whose magical power is extensive and whose long-life is the

same as the Heaven's.”

The storytellers in Yangzhou’s teahouses often narrated the stories of Sui and Tang dynasties, which he had heard many times. The names Cheng Yaojin and Xu Maogong were deeply etched in his mind. Actually Xu Maogong was the great general of the founding of the Tang Dynasty, Xu Ji, who shared the same fame as Li Jing[93], the (National) Duke of Ying Li Ji[94]; he was absolutely not an ox-nosed military master who pinched fingers and making calculation to know the past and the future; but how would Wei Xiaobao know about it? [Translator’s note: ox-nosed is a derogatory term to refer to Taoist priests.] He was simply trying to paint a living-spirit, living-image picture to swindle Fat Toutuo, to make him confused and disoriented, so that the eighteen Shaolin monks could seize the opportunity to save him. As for ‘Hong Jiaozhu’s magical power is extensive and his long-life is the same as the Heaven's’ and so on, he heard it in the big house of the Zhuang family, when Zhang Laosan and the other Shen Long Jiao people mentioning it. Sure enough, as soon as Fat Toutuo heard this, he grabbed his own head and scratched his own ears in infinite joy, his mouth was opened wide and he could not close it again.

Wei Xiaobao said, “I wonder if there is something else written on the back of this big stone.”

“Yes!” Fat Toutuo said. He walked around to look at the back of the stone tablet.

Wei Xiaobao took a sudden big stride forward and jumped backward. Fat Toutuo was startled, and hastily reached out to grab. Four Shaolin monks from both sides simultaneously waved their palms to strike. Fat Toutuo did not have any choice but to send a fist to ward off. By this time Wei Xiaobao had already hidden behind the Shaolin monks. In an instant four more Shaolin monks stepped forward.

Eight Shaolin monks constantly circle around Fat Toutuo in fast motion, while their hands continuously sent out attack after attack. It did not matter if the attack hit the target or not, as soon as one strike failed, the next strike arrived. Sixteen hands struck from eight directions; obviously it was a well-trained formation. Fat Toutuo's defense was very tight, but with one against eight, right away he sensed that he would not be able to endure.

'Slap! Slap!' a Shaolin monk exchanged palm strikes with Fat Toutuo. The Shaolin monk jumped out of the arena, another monk stepped in. After fighting for a while, Fat Toutuo's leg was kicked. He stretched out his arms, made a turn, and forced the eight Shaolin monks to withdraw two steps back. "Hold on!" he called out.

Each one of the eight Shaolin monks took two more steps back. Fat Toutuo said, "Today the few are no match for the many, I'll give the sutra back to you!" Reaching into his bosom, he took out the sutra.

Cheng Xin waved his left hand, the eight Shaolin monks took two steps forward, now they were less than three *chi* away from Fat Toutuo, each one poised for another strike. Fat Toutuo ignored them completely. He held out his hand with the sutra in it. Cheng Xin circulated the internal energy from his *dantian* several times, now his entire body was shielded with his inner strength. He put his three left fingers together in secret to guard against the follow-up attack. Only then did he stretch out his right hand to slowly receive the sutra.

Unexpectedly, Fat Toutuo did not make any move; he returned the sutra and then with a smile he said, "Cheng Xin *Dashi*, your eighteen luohan of Shaolin is world famous, eighteen of you beat me, one man; don't you think it is rather lack of splendor?"

Cheng Xin put the sutra into his bosom, put his palms

together, bowed and said, “Forgive our offense. In one-on-one combat, Shaolin monks are not the Fat Revered Monk’s match.” With a wave of his left hand, all the monks withdrew simultaneously. For fear that he would try to grab Wei Xiaobao again, five or six monks stood on guard in front of him.

“Benefactor Wei,” Fat Toutuo said, “I have an earnest request that I will ask you to please grant it to me.”

“What is it?” Wei Xiaobao asked.

“I want to invite you to the Divine Dragon Island,” Fat Toutuo replied, “To be our guest for several days.”

Wei Xiaobao was taken aback, “What?” he said, “You want me to go to the Divine Dragon Island? That kind of place …”

Fat Toutuo said, “The young benefactor’s sutra is in Cheng Xin *Dashi*’s hand, he will submit it to Shaolin Fangzhang. The young benefactor is coming to the Divine Dragon Island, our Cult people, from top to bottom, will definitely treat you with utmost respect. After you meet with Hong Jiaozhu, I will definitely send young benefactor out of the island safe and sound.”

He saw Wei Xiaobao was closing his mouth tight, obviously he did not believe him; thereupon he said, "Cheng Xin *Dashi*, I am asking you to be my witness. Have you ever known Fat Toutuo said something but not doing it?"

Cheng Xin knew that although this *toutuo*'s conduct was rather heretical and presumptuous, he was not significantly evil. The fact that fat and thin, two *toutuo* had always fulfilled their promise, he had indeed heard about it long ago. He said, "The fact that Fat Revered Monk is trustworthy is widely known. It's just that Benefactor Wei has a very important matter to attend, I am afraid he won't have time to go to the Divine Dragon Island."

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said, "I am extremely busy. When I have time in the future, I will go to the Divine Dragon Island

to visit Fat Revered Monk and Hong Jiaozhu."

Fat Toutuo hastily said, "You should have said Hong Jiaozhu and his, the Senior's, subordinate Fat Toutuo. First, there is no one in the world may rank above him, the Senior. By saying other people's name first before mentioning Hong Jiaozhu is highly disrespectful."

"What about the Emperor?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Fat Toutuo replied, "Naturally Hong Jiaozhu first, the Emperor behind him. Second, in the presence of Jiaozhu, the Senior, you must not mention 'Revered Monk' or 'Taoist Master'[95]. In this entire world, only Hong Jiaozhu deserves to be revered."

Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue and said, "Hong Jiaozhu is so formidable, I do not dare to meet him even more."

Fat Toutuo said, "Hong Jiaozhu is benevolent and loving, his kindness covers the whole world. Toward a brilliant and clever young hero like young benefactor, the Senior is sure to be absolutely thrilled. If the young benefactor goes to the Divine Dragon Island, you will definitely return from a rewarding journey. The Senior, Jiaozhu, is very generous, it goes without saying. Perhaps when the Senior is happy, he would teach you a move or half a style; henceforth the young benefactor will be able to reap endless benefit when you are roaming the world."

He was speaking very sincerely, fervently and passionately. At first he did not even consider Wei Xiaobao worthy in his eyes, he even stepped on his head, but now his speech was full of 'young benefactor' and 'a brilliant and clever young hero'. Afraid that Wei Xiaobao could not hear him clearly, he bent his bamboo-pole-like body and spoke next to his ear.

Wei Xiaobao recalled Tao Hongying's story, and remembered seeing the action of Zhang Laosan and the other at the Zhuang home; he also remembered the Empress Dowager and Liu Yan,

and the appearance of the fake palace maid, the man who dressed as a woman. In short, he had an unspeakable disgust toward Shen Long Jiao. Comparatively speaking, among the Shen Long Jiao people, Fat Toutuo still had several part of lofty quality as a hero. But after using force to rob the sutra and carrying Wei Xiaobao here and there, now suddenly his manner changed completely, he wanted to invite him as a guest to the Divine Dragon Island, Wei Xiaobao was certain that Fat Toutuo was harboring some malicious intentions. Right now he was speaking politely, but it must be because he was no match for the Shaolin monks. As soon as the Shaolin monks left, he would definitely resort to violence again, and then who would be able to put him under control? Thereupon Wei Xiaobao shook his head and said, "I am not going!"

Fat Toutuo's thin face looked extremely dejected. Slowly he straightened up his body, and cast a glance toward the eighteen Shaolin monks surrounding him. "Young benefactor," he said slowly, "In your opinion, how is my martial art compared to these eighteen great monks?"

"Each has its strong points," Wei Xiaobao said.

"What do you mean each has its strong points?" Fat Toutuo angrily said, "If we fight one on one, do you think they can beat me?"

Wei Xiaobao replied, "One on one, perhaps you will win. One against eighteen, you will definitely lose. This is what I mean by each has its strong points. If one on one and you still lose, you don't have any farting points! Your only strong point is that you are taller than they are."

Fat Toutuo smiled and said, "Have you seen anybody else with martial art skill as superior as mine?"

"Of course I have!" Wei Xiaobao replied, "Your martial art skill is just so-so, I have seen not a few people whose martial art

skill is ten times better than yours."

Fat Toutuo was angry; he jumped one step forward with stretched arm to grab him. Four Shaolin monks simultaneously stretched out their palms to block. Fat Toutuo said, "Name those people whose martial art is superior to mine."

Momentarily Wei Xiaobao was at a loss for words; he could not remember seeing anybody whose martial art skill was higher than his. His own Shifu's martial art skill was extremely high, but he could not necessarily beat him.

Fat Toutuo was very smug, he said, "You see, you can't name even one, can you?"

"What do you mean I can't name one?" Wei Xiaobao said, "I just don't want to tell you, for fear you might be really frightened. There are so many people whose martial art skill is higher than yours. The first one is Tian Di Hui's *Zongduozhu* Chen Jinnan. I have seen him fighting in Beijing, with his pair of hands he caught four *toutuo*, each *toutuo* weighs more than two hundred catties. With just a kick of his legs, he was able to jump over the city wall. If you fight with him, the difference is way too far."

"Humph," Fat Toutuo snorted. He had also heard the name of Chen Jinnan, but did not believe that he was able to jump over the city wall carrying four people. "Braggart!" he said.

"The second person whose martial art is superior," Wei Xiaobao continued, "Is a sweet, tender-footed young mistress." Speaking to this point, he cast a glance toward Shuang'er. Shuang'er repeatedly shook her hand, telling him not to continue. But Wei Xiaobao continued, "One time this young mistress fought thirty-six Wudang's Taoist priests. Thirty-six priests surrounded her, using ... using some sort of formation."

Fat Toutuo asked, "About that Wudang Pai's formation, were they barehanded or using swords?"

"Using swords," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"That must be Zhenwu[96] Sword Formation," Fat Toutuo said.

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said, "Pang *Dashi* [great master fat] is experienced and knowledgeable, you know about Zhenwu Sword Formation. At that time those thirty-six swords surrounded the young mistress, the swords flickered that even water could not splash through. The young mistress had a child in her left hand, her right hand was unarmed ..."

Fat Toutuo was greatly amazed. "She fought Wudang Pai with a child in her left hand?" he asked.

"What's so strange about it?" Wei Xiaobao said, "Actually, she was carrying two little babies, both were boys, they were very fat ..." He deliberately exaggerated the martial art skill of the young mistress of the Zhuang family, so he doubled the number of child in her arm. He said, " ... with her mouth she was soothing the babies: 'Two sweet babies, don't cry, watch your mama doing some tricks', while seizing the swords in those thirty-six priests hands and sealed those priests' acupoints, so that all of them were frozen in place, just like clay Bodhisattva, without able to move at all. Carrying the babies, the young mistress let them grab the old priests' beard. The old priests stared in anger, but the two babies were laughing very happily."

Wudang Pai and Shaolin Pai were equally famous, their martial art went back for a thousand years; Wei Xiaobao knew this. He saw how Fat Toutuo was not able to defeat the eighteen Shaolin monks, so he said that that young mistress was able to overpower thirty-six Taoist priests. Whose martial art strong, whose martial art weak, he did not have to talk too much.

Listening to him, Fat Toutuo stared blankly like he suddenly lost his mind. He sighed and said, "Unexpectedly there is such magical martial art in the world!"

Seeing surprisingly he believed his lie, Wei Xiaobao was very proud of himself. He said, "I am not concealing anything from you, this young mistress is my own godmother."

When he started talking about Jiangnan's young mistress, Shuang'er thought that he was talking about the Third Mistress; but then later he mentioned that the young mistress had a pair of twin boys, plus she was Wei Xiaobao's godmother, hence she realized he was talking about someone else. But Fat Toutuo was shocked. "Your godmother?" he asked, "What's her surname? There is such a formidable figure in Wulin, yet how come I have never heard about it?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "There are plentiful formidable figures in Wulin. Take my wife here for example," he pointed to Shuang'er, "As you can see, she is petite, cute and exquisite looking; how do you know she knew martial art?"

Shuang'er blushed; she said, "*Xianggong*, don't talk nonsense."

Fat Toutuo had had some exchange with Shuang'er, this kind of petite lady, surprisingly her skill was quite amazing; were it not for him personally witnessing it, it would be hard for him to believe. He nodded and said, "You are right. Since the young benefactor is unwilling to visit the Divine Dragon Island, there's nothing I can do. Gentlemen, please!"

Wei Xiaobao said, "*Dashi*, you first!" He appeared to be polite, but actually he wanted Fat Toutuo to leave first; if he went to the east, then Wei Xiaobao would go to the west, if he went to the north, then Wei Xiaobao would go to the south.

Fat Toutuo shook his head and said, "Young benefactor, please go first. I want to make a rubbing of the inscription engraved on this stone tablet."

Wei Xiaobao laughed inwardly, thinking that his wild talk was unexpectedly believed as the truth.

Book note:

1. The content of the title of this chapter was from careful research of ancient poetry, its level and oblique tones (technical term for classical Chinese rhythmic poetry) is different from contemporary form of strict poetic form with eight lines of 5, 6 or 7 syllables and even lines rhyming.

2. Four empresses of Shunzhi. Empress Duan Jing, whose maiden name was Donggo, and Empress Xiao Kang, Kangxi's birth mother, were buried together as husband and wives to show filial piety. Empress Fei[97] and Empress Xiao Hui (the 'Empress Dowager' in our book) were separately buried in the Xiao Dong Ling [Eastern Qing Tombs]. 'Xiao Kang' and 'Xiao Hui' were posthumous titles granted during the reigns of Emperors Yongzheng and Qianlong. The titles were not known during Kangxi's reign. But popular fiction does not need to follow such a strict compliance to historical facts.

3. The matter of Shunzhi leaving home to become a monk on Mount Wutai was a widely spread folklore during the Qing Dynasty. It was known as one of the 'Four Qing Mysteries' [or 'doubtful cases']. The other three mysteries were: Shunzhi's Empress Dowager married a regent later on, Yongzheng's got his first wife by force, Qianlong actually came from Chen family in Haining [county level city in Jiaxing, Zhejiang province]. According to official record, Shunzhi died of smallpox; however, there are too many doubtful points in the official record, to such an extent that people of later generation could only guess what had really happened. A great poet of early Qing Dynasty, Wu Meichun wrote four-stanza poem 'Mount Qing Liang's Poem of Praise to Buddha'. It is definitely related to Consort Donggo. Quite a number of people believe that because of his grief over his beloved

concubine's death, Shunzhi has left home to become a Buddhist monk on Mount Wutai. The poem says, 'There's a high mountain in the northwest, people say it's the Wenshu [Manjushri] Platform. On the platform there's a bright moon pond, where thousand-leaf golden lotus blooms, the blossoms reflecting each other's shadow, the leaves grow together with the root. The queen mother carries Shuang Cheng [double success?], the green canopy reaches to the cloud (note: Shuang Cheng points to female fairy Dong Shuang Cheng). The Han Lord sits on the Palace of Buddhist teaching, he hesitates as soon as exposed to the light. Binding the hearts together, giving away nine ornamental hairpins ... hand in hand neglecting the greatest news, extreme happiness gives birth to minuscule sorrow. Loneliness of a thousand autumns ended, who will wholeheartedly accompany me today? ... ' (It was said that while Consort Donggo received special favor from Shunzhi; Shunzhi's own life was inconsistently tragic. The entire poem was very long, it will not be copied here in its entirety). 'Wounded heart is frightened by the cold wind, deep in the Palace the crickets chirp. Severe frost covers the jasper tree, hibiscus withered from the core. It's a pity a thousand *li* grass, withered away losing its color.' (note: 'thousand-*li* grass' [千里草] are characters form the 'Dong' [董] character, referring to the death of Consort Donggo.) ... 'The south-facing storehouse stretches to the grave (referring to Cao Cao's [famous statesman and general at the end of Han, the main villain of the novel 'Romance of Three Kingdoms'] son who died prematurely in infancy, King Deng Ai, Cao Cangshu [Cangshu means 'stretched storehouse'], a comparison to Prince Rong), covering the face, adding to the broken heart. Abstain from words, feed my horse with grain, roaming the eight extremities.' (It was told that when his beloved concubine passed away, Shunzhi's innermost being was so sorrowful that he was thinking of leaving the mortal

world). 'The eight extremities is boundless, it is pointing to the Qing Liang Mountain. This mountain stores up deities, noble spirits to examine the wrong ... Famous mountain initially looks at the good fortune, accepting instruction to release the way of the well-being, preparing to sprinkle seven Buddhist earthen jars from the highest peak ... From the seat of a celestial being, breathing out air like silken sandalwood. Sending words to the Han Emperor, is it worth the trouble to remain in the mortal world? ... Only a broad mind, like a rock, will never be published. Hereby protecting the golden wheel, the law of the ocean has no billows (talking about Shunzhi's aspiration to go to Mount Wutai). Tasting and hearing the solemn Son of Heaven, six hired hands cover ten thousand *li* ... magnificent concubine's ailment cannot be saved, waving the whip, tears flow like water. Han Emperor like an immortal, his wife considers getting rid of her slippers ... favoring instead to seize the government power of the long gate, graciousness leans to the Qing city. Magnificent jade decorating the night, heartache and grief like the mourning cicada. None of the sufferings does not have a death side to it, to have the power of commanding the morning sun to rise ... maintaining the propriety toward the ruler, virtuous sage to set the course. Taking part in the way does not need the brilliance of the ruler, declining meritorious deed promising disgrace, empty appearance cannot be repeated, like packing up a reservoir of the wind.' (Toward the ruler points to Sakyamuni Buddha. Attributed to his conversion to the Dharma, seeking relief by Zen Buddhism).

4. When he was on the throne, Shunzhi has already taken Yulin as his master in the study of Buddhism. From Yulin's chronicle as the teacher of the state: in the Shunzhi's sixteenth year, the 'forefather of the world' asked the master to bestow a name, the master offered more than ten characters, the 'forefather of the world' picked the character

'chi' [imbecile/sentimental/stupid/foolish], in conjunction with the character 'Xing', which was handed down by forefather of Zen Buddhism's sect of Long Chi [dragon pond], and thus his Buddhist name was 'Xing Chi'. Yulin himself was of the 'Tong' [go through/pass] generation, his name was 'Tong Xiu' ['xiu' means jade], Yulin [yulin means jade forest]; therefore, his disciples used the 'Xing' [to walk/to go/to travel] as their generation name.

Chapter 19

Nine divisions[98] amass metal to be cast in a row, hundred-gold set up timber to provoke a flock of devils.
(Translated by Foxs)

Wei Xiaobao looked at the painting and calligraphy on the wall, but he did not recognize a single character. Shaking his head he said, "This calligraphy is not too good." Mr. Lu felt a deep veneration as he asked for directions on the faulty stroke and weak points of the calligraphy. "There are too many faulty strokes, there are too little superb strokes!" Wei Xiaobao said.

The eighteen Shaolin monks, along with Wei Xiaobao and Shuang'er, went down the Jin Xiu Peak. Cheng Xin returned the sutra to Wei Xiaobao; he asked, "Will Benefactor return to Beijing immediately?"

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Cheng Xin said, "I received Yulin *Dashi*'s request to escort Benefactor until you arrive safely to the Capital."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, "That's wonderful," he said, "I was worrying that that bamboo-pole *toutuo* is not willing to give up and thus will come again to give me trouble. But if you all come with me, will someone protect Xing Chi *Dashi*?"

"Benefactor may set your heart at ease," Cheng Xin said, "Yulin *Dashi* has other arrangement."

Now Wei Xiaobao was in complete admiration toward the old monk Yulin. He was always sitting in meditation with his eyes closed, so much so that he would not even care if the sky collapsed, but without a word or movement, he had made appropriate arrangement for everything in secret. With the Shaolin's Eighteen Lohan escorting him, there was no danger whatsoever along the way. Not only the tall and thin Fat Toutuo did not appear, they did not even meet a single Wulin character along the way.

One day they arrived outside Beijing. The eighteen Shaolin monks bade their farewell to Wei Xiaobao. Cheng Xin said, "Benefactor has arrived at the Capital, the old monk and my brothers say our goodbye to return to our temple."

Wei Xiaobao said, "All the great monks have bore suffering to escort me to this place, I … I really can't thank you enough, please accept my deepest respect." While saying that, he kneeled down to kowtow.

Cheng Xin busily helped him up, saying, "Along the way,

Benefactor has treated us very well. From Shanxi to Beijing we were roaming the mountain playing on the water [i.e. going on a scenic tour], where is the suffering?”

What happened was that as soon as they left Mount Wutai, Wei Xiaobao immediately hired nineteen large carriages. He and Shuang’er rode on one, each one of the eighteen Shaolin monks rode on one carriage. He ordered Yu Ba, on a fast horse, to go ahead of them, a day in advance, to arrange the lodging along the way, preparing tea, delicacies, vegetarian dishes, *etc.* Everything was top-notch. On each place they stopped, Wei Xiaobao always splurged on tips, so that the shopkeeper and the attendants treated the eighteen Shaolin monks as if they were deities Bodhisattva. Shaolin monks exercise self-control and lead ascetics life, they do not seek after these food and drink, but seeing Wei Xiaobao treated them with respect and looked very sincere, inevitably they were quite happy. Although Wei Xiaobao was glib-tongued, his natural disposition was friendly, easy to make friends, and contrary to what one might expect, he was sincere towards his friends. Along the way he chatted with the monks and got along very well with them. Now that suddenly they have to say goodbye, his heart ached and he could not stop the tears from flowing down.

“Shanzai, shanzai! [good, peace]” Cheng Xin said, “Why is young benefactor grieving? If there’s karma, another day you can visit us at Shaolin Temple and we can chat.”

With a sob Wei Xiaobao said, “Indeed I must come.”

By the time Cheng Xin and the other monks had left and they entered the city, it was already late in the evening, hence it was inappropriate to enter the Palace. Wei Xiaobao went to a large inn at the Xizhimen[99] district, the ‘Ru Gui[100] Inn’. He asked for the best room, planning to spend the night there, and see Kangxi the next day, to report everything. He thought, “That

thin and annoying Fat Toutuo is desperate to get his hand on my sutra, maybe he is still following me in secret. The eighteen Shaolin monks have already left, if he came back to get it by force, Shuang'er and I would not be able to stop him. I had better work a little bit to hide the sutra first. Tomorrow when I get to the Palace, I can take a large group of Imperial Bodyguards here to get it, then present it to the young emperor. This is called 'not one in ten thousand failures' [wan shi wu yi]!"

Thereupon he ordered Yu Ba to make preparation and sent Shuang'er out of the room, bolted the door and closed the window, before making sure that Fat Toutuo was not peeking outside. And then he wrapped the sutra in oilcloth, pulled the table, took out his dagger, and cut a hole on the brick floor underneath the table. The dagger was able to cut iron like mud, naturally it could cut mud effortlessly. After putting the sutra inside the hole, he put the brick back and mixing ash and water, he spread the paste over the brick slit. When the paste was dry, no one would ever find it unless one was deliberately looking for it.

Early in the morning the next day, he ordered Yu Ba to hire a carriage, he wanted to take Shuang'er for a sumptuous light breakfast first. He wanted to spend a lot of money to let this little servant girl broaden her outlook. Afterwards, he needed to buy a set of eunuch clothes and hat before entering the Palace. But buying eunuch clothes and hat in the marketplace was not really easy. If he could not buy one, he thought he would wear Imperial Bodyguard uniform and a yellow Magua on top of it, then he would look very impressive as he swaggered into the Palace. Wouldn't it be interesting to see the Imperial Bodyguards and the eunuchs' dumbstruck expression when they see him? After all, his Deputy Chief of Imperial Bodyguards was bestowed personally by His Majesty, was it not? He said in his heart, "With this idea, why would I toil

myself to become an eunuch? That's it, *Laozi* will enter the Palace wearing the yellow Magua."

With Shuang'er he climbed into the carriage, bent his tongue, and spoke in Beijing accent, "We'll go to the ol' Kuixing [the great bear constellation] Shop in Xidan[101] first. Their deep-fried sheep tail and mutton dumpling are not bad at all."

"Yes!" the carriage driver respectfully said.

With a straight back Yu Ba sat by the carriage driver. "Hey," he said, "In the Capital, even the mule is standing out from the masses, not even one of such a pitch-black mule with large eyes can be found within our Shanxi province."

As he returned to the Capital, Wei Xiaobao's heart had a different feeling of self-satisfaction.

After traveling for a while, the carriage suddenly went out of Xizhimen. Wei Xiaobao said, "Hey, we are going to Xidan, why are we going out of town?"

"Yes," the cart driver said, "I am sorry *Daye* [big master]! *Xiaoren*'s mule is stubborn, when we reach the city gate, he always wants to slip out of town."

Wei Xiaobao and Shuang'er laughed. Yu Ba said, "Hey, in the Capital, even the mules are putting on official airs."

As the large carriage left the city gate, it travelled straight to the north. After about a *li*, it still had not turned back. Wei Xiaobao knew something was amiss; he said sternly, "Driver, what trick are you playing? Quickly go back!"

The driver repeatedly said yes, he shouted, "Go back, mule, hu, hu, mule, go back!" The cart driver lashed his whip randomly, but the mule forcefully ran to the north, it bolted faster and faster. The cart driver cursed, "Damn it stinky mule, I told you to go back! Mule, stop, stop! Your granny's bastard mule!" His shout became more and more urgent, but how could

the mule be willing to stop?

Right this moment, there was sound of horse's hoof, two riders from the side rushed over and rode close to the mule carriage. The riders were two tall and sturdy men. In a low voice Wei Xiaobao said, "Make your move!"

Shuang'er leaned forward and stretched out her finger to poke the middle of the cart driver's back. His body swayed, he fell down from the carriage with a loud cry, and was trampled by the rider head on. The rider flew up and landed on the carriage driver's seat. Shuang'er stretched out her finger again. The man turned his hand around to catch her wrist. Shuang'er flipped her palm and slapped his face. The man parried with his left palm, while trying to grab her shoulder with his right hand.

The two of them exchanged eight, nine moves, while the mule was still running fast. The rider on the left called out, "What happened? Why are you still playing?"

'Bang!' the man on the carriage got hit by Shuang'er right palm on the pit of his stomach, he fell down. The other man raised his whip to strike. Shuang'er reached out and caught the whip and in one fluid motion wound it around the carriage. The mule carriage was rushing forward, the whip was pulled, the man was immediately thrown down from the horse that he hastily let go of the whip and let out a loud 'wah wah' cry.

Shuang'er picked up the reins. She did not know how to drive a cart, so she handed it over to Yu Ba and said, "You drive the cart."

"I … this I can't," Yu Ba said.

Wei Xiaobao jumped onto the driver seat, and took over the taut rope; he did not know how to drive cart either, but he imitated the cart driver's 'mule, mule' calls, left hand loosened the reins, right hand tightened it, just like riding a horse. As expected, the mule turned around; where had the

stubbornness gone?

They heard another sound of horse's hoof, a dozen or more riders rushed over. Wei Xiaobao was greatly alarmed, he pulled the mule that the cart swerved in an oblique angle. The riders also turned their horse to pursue from behind. The horses were fast, the carriage was slow, not too long afterwards, those dozen or so riders had surrounded the mule cart.

Seeing each one of the horse riders was holding a weapon, Wei Xiaobao called out, "Under the bright sunny sky, near the throne of the Son of Heaven, you want to cut our way and rob us?"

A man said with a laugh, "We are envoys to invite you to dinner, not to rob you. Wei *Gongzi*, our master is inviting you to drink several cups of wine!"

Wei Xiaobao was startled. "Who is your master?" he asked.

The man replied, "As soon as *Gongzi* see him, you will naturally recognize him. If our master is not *Gongzi*'s friend, why would he invite you to drink wine?"

Seeing these men acted strange, Wei Xiaobao knew that most likely they were harboring ill intentions. "How can there be such invitation?" he called out, "Excuse me, let me pass!"

Another man laughed and said, "Let you pass? We'll let you pass, then!" Raising the saber in his hand, he chopped the mule's head; the mule's body swayed sideways and fell to the ground, pulling the carriage along with it. Wei Xiaobao and Shuang'er hurriedly leaped down. Shuang'er moved like the wind, it's just that the enemies were on horsebacks, while she was short, so she could not reach the enemies. One by one she jabbed with her finger, if not the horse' eyes, then the acupoints on those men's legs. Instantly there was a clamor of horses neighing in confusion. Several men jumped down from their horses, they charged forward with brandished sabers.

Shuang’er was extremely agile and nimble, poking to the east striking to the west, she knocked down seven, eight men. The remaining four or five men looked at each other in dismay, at a loss of what to do.

On the main road a small carriage galloped over, a woman’s voice from the carriage called out, “We are on the same side, don’t fight!”

As soon as Wei Xiaobao heard the voice, his heart blossomed and his anger subsided. “Aha!” he called out, “My wife is here!”

Shuang'er and the men immediately stopped fighting. Shuang'er was greatly puzzled, she did not expect this *xianggong* had already had young mistress. But at that time, marrying too early was prevalent, it was not uncommon for a fourteen, fifteen years old man to get married, it's just that Wei Xiaobao had never told her that he had a wife.

The small carriage arrived, from inside jumped a person, it was none other than Fang Yi. Wei Xiaobao was grinning from ear to ear, he stepped forward and pulled her hand, saying, "Good *Jiejie*, I miss you very much, where have you been?"

Fang Yi smiled and said, "We'll talk about it later. Why did you fight each other?" She saw a lot of men were lying on the ground, the mule's blood splattered everywhere; she was quite stunned.

A man bowed and said, "Miss Fang, we are here to invite Wei *Gongzi* for a drink, I suppose our manner was not satisfactory and we have offended *Gongzi*. If Miss Fang could invite him personally, it would be best."

Fang Yi was amazed, "Did you knock these people down?" she asked, "Your martial art skill must have been increased a hundred-fold."

"Even if I made progress, it wouldn't be this quick," Wei Xiaobao replied, "It was Miss Shuang'er who protected me. She

is young, but her skill is prominent."

Fang Yi turned toward Shuang'er. Noticing Shuang'er was about thirteen, fourteen years of age, with gentle and shy appearance, she did not believe her martial art skill to be this superior. "*Meimei*, what's your surname?" she asked. When she was at the Zhuang's house, she did not see Shuang'er at all, therefore, the two of them did not know each other.

Shuang'er stepped forward, kneeled down and kowtowed, saying, "Your maid servant Shuang'er is paying her respect to the Young Mistress." Wei Xiaobao burst out in laughter.

Fang Yi was so embarrassed that her entire face turned red; hastily she dodged and said, "You ... what did you call me? I ... I'm ... not."

Shuang'er stood up and said, "Xianggong said that you are his wife, your maid servant is serving Xianggong, naturally I am calling you Young Mistress."

Fang Yi cast a vicious glance toward Wei Xiaobao; she said, "This man's mouth always talks nonsense, don't believe him. How long have you been serving him? Don't tell me you do not know his character by now. I am Miss Fang."

Shuang'er showed a faint smile and said, "In that case I won't call you that for now, but someday I will."

"Someday you will call me wh ..." Fang Yi started, but then she blushed again, and swallowed the last word 'what'.

Shuang'er looked at Wei Xiaobao, he was having an immensely proud of himself expression on his face, suddenly Shuang'er also blushed. She remembered how at Mount Wutai he had also told Fat Toutuo that she was his wife. Turned out he had this habit of calling young ladies his wives. So that when she heard him laughing and then asking, "How's my young wife?" Shuang'er did not think differently.

Fang Yi cast him another malicious look; she said, "We have not seen each other for such a long time, as soon as we meet, you did not speak decent words, but act garrulously instead." Immediately she ordered the men to tidy up to continue on their journey. These men's acupoints were sealed by Shuang'er, they were unable to move a single step, hence Shuang'er had to release them one by one.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "If I had known that you are inviting me for a drink, I would have wished I could grow wings and fly to you."

Fang Yi cast him another malicious look; she said, "You have already forgotten me, naturally you would not have thought that I am inviting you."

Wei Xiaobao felt sweetness in his heart; he said, "How can I forget you? If I had known you are looking for me, forget about drinking wine, even if you want me to drink horse's pee or poison, I would willingly come, without the slightest delay."

Fang Yi's pair of beautiful eyes gazed at him; she said, "Don't just say things that are good to hear, what if I really want you to go to the ends of the earth and drink poison?"

Wei Xiaobao saw that when she said those words, her expression was like smiling, yet she was not smiling, under the morning sun she looked unspeakably gorgeous; he felt his whole body was comfortably warm. He said, "Let's not mention the ends of the earth, even go up the mountain of blades or go down a deep fryer, I would still go."

"Alright," Fang Yi said, "A real man gave his words, some horses cannot chase it."

Wei Xiaobao slapped his own chest and loudly exclaimed, "A real man gave his words, some horses cannot chase it." The two of them burst out in laughter.

Fang Yi ordered a man to get a horse for Wei Xiaobao to ride,

she let Shuang'er sit on her own little carriage, while she rode another horse and travelled side-by-side with Wei Xiaobao. Facing the morning sun, they let their horses gallop leisurely. The men followed behind them.

Fang Yi said, "Your talent is really good, you managed to pick such a powerful flower, obtaining a servant girl with such superior martial art skill."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "What do you mean picking such a powerful flower? It was her who is most willing to follow me." Wei Xiaobao then asked about Mu Jianping, Xu Tianchuan and the others' whereabouts. "In that haunted house," he said, "You were captured by those Shen Long Jiao fellows. Afterwards, how did you escape? Was it the Third Mistress of the Zhuang Family who sent people to help you?"

"Who's the Third Mistress of the Zhuang Family?" Fang Yi asked.

"She is the master of the Zhuang house," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Fang Yi shook her head, "Master of the Zhuang house?" she asked, "All along we did not meet anybody. Shen Long Jiao only want you, but they did not have any ill-intention toward you. When that Zhang Laosan failed to find you, he let us go. Xiao Junzhu and the others are ahead of us, very soon you will be able to see them." Turning her head toward him, there was a sullen look on her face as she said, "In your heart you only have Xiao Junzhu; we have only met for a short time, yet you have already asked about her seven, eight times."

Wei Xiaobao laughed, "When did I ask you seven or eight times?" he said, "I have really suffered injustice. If I saw her but did not see you, by this time I would have asked her seventy, eighty times."

Fang Yi smiled and said, "Even if you grew ten mouths, you would not be able to ask seventy, eighty times in such a short

time. But knowing you, one mouth is more formidable than ten mouths."

The two of them chatting and joking, in a short while they already travelled more than ten *li*, winding around Beijing's city wall, and went straight to the east. "Are we almost there?" Wei Xiaobao asked.

Fang Yi looked hurt, "It's still far away," she said, "Even if you are anxious to see Xiao Junzhu, you don't have to be this impatient. If I had known it, it would have been much better to let her to come and pick you up, so that you wouldn't be deeply worried."

Wei Xiaobao stuck out his tongue and said, "Henceforth I won't ask another word."

Fang Yi said, "Your mouth won't ask, but your heart is anxious; you will make me angry even more."

It appeared that her vinegar [jealousy] was getting thicker; the more Wei Xiaobao listened, the happier he was. He laughed and said, "If I have just half a part of anxiety in my heart, I am not your husband, but your son."

"Pfft!" Fang Yi stifled her laughter; she said, "Good ..." her face turned red, she could not push the following word 'son' out of her mouth.

They travelled until noon, when they arrived at a small town to take a rest before continuing their journey to the east. Wei Xiaobao did not dare to ask where they were going anymore, he realized they had left Beijing far behind, and that he would not have time to hurry back to the Palace to see Kangxi that day, but he thought, "Xiao Xuanzi did not tell me when I should be back anyway, I could be delayed on Mount Wutai, or was captured and detained by that Fat Toutuo. What's the harm in returning to the Palace several days late?"

Along the way Fang Yi kept him company by having idle talks

with him. When they were together in the Imperial Palace, although the two of them were in the same room, a third person, Mu Jianping, was also present, so that Fang Yi was quite reserved. This time they were riding slowly side-by-side, she was talking and laughing eagerly and attentively. The rest of their party were being tactful, they lagged quite far behind.

Wei Xiaobao was at the stage of 'first awakening of love'. When he called her 'his wife' at the Palace, he was 60% joking, 30% being frivolous and taking advantage of her precarious situation, only 10% was being driven by faint attraction between opposite sexes. Today they met again after separation, seeing sometimes Fang Yi was annoyed and angry, sometimes she was talking and laughing tenderly, Wei Xiaobao could not help but was aroused by passion. He saw after riding for most of the day, her cheeks were flushed, tiny beads of sweat appeared on her face, she looked unspeakably dainty and cute. He could not help but staring at her with a blank expression on his face.

Fang Yi laughed and said, "Why are you staring with blank expression like that?"

"Good *Jiejie*," Wei Xiaobao said, "You ... you look really pretty. I think ... I think ..."

"What are you thinking?" Fang Yi asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "If I tell you, you must not get angry."

"If you are speaking properly, I won't get angry," Fang Yi said, "But if you are being indecent, naturally I will get angry. What are you thinking?"

"I think, if you really become my wife, I don't know how much happier I will be," Wei Xiaobao said.

Fang Yi cast him a sidelong glance with a wooden face, and then turned her head away. Wei Xiaobao anxiously said, "Good *Jiejie*, are you angry?"

"Naturally I am angry," Fang Yi said, "I am a hundred and twenty percent angry."

Wei Xiaobao said, "But nothing could be more proper than this, I ... I spoke very sincerely."

Fang Yi said, "In the Palace, I have already made an oath; I will follow you for the rest of my life, I will serve you. Do you think that was real, or fake? By saying that, aren't you thinking to cease being faithful?"

Wei Xiaobao was ecstatic; if not for the fact that both of them were on horsebacks, he would embrace her immediately and kiss her tender and beautiful, desirable face. Immediately he stretched out his right hand to pull her left hand, saying, "How can I cease being faithful? A thousand years, ten thousand years, I will never cease to be faithful."

"You are clearly lying," Fang Yi said, "How can a man live for a thousand years, ten thousand years? Unless you are a turtle ..." When speaking the word 'turtle', she broke into laughter, and turned her head away, but she still let him holding her hand.

Holding her soft, warm and tender palm, Wei Xiaobao's heart was bursting with joy. He laughed and said, "With you treating me this well, I will never be a turtle." When one's wife is having an affair with another man, then the husband becomes a 'turtle'; Fang Yi also understood this sense of pride.

With a sweet face she said, "Not three sentences of good words, a dog's mouth will never grow ivory."

Wei Xiaobao laughed, "If you marry a chicken follow the chicken, if you marry a dog follow the dog," he said, "If you wish to see your husband grow ivory in this lifetime, it will be very hard to come by." Fang Yi bent over the saddle in laughter, her left hand tightly gripped his palm.

The two of them chatting and laughing all the way until

evening, when they lodged for the night in a large inn in a rather large town. The next morning Wei Xiaobao ordered Yu Ba to hire a large carriage, so that he could ride with Fang Yi inside. The conversation between them was thick with passion. Wei Xiaobao embraced her waist and kissed her face. Fang Yi did not resist, but she categorically forbade him to overstep the boundary. In the matter between male and female, actually Wei Xiaobao seemed to understand, but not really understood, so far he was quite happy. His only wish was that the large carriage would never stop moving, so that he could sit embracing a beautiful woman [orig. jade person], traveling to the ends of the earth, and then turn around, and travel to the other ends of the earth, that the road under the heavens would continue forever; or even if it ends, what's the harm of going anywhere on foot?

Every day they would travel until night fall, where they lodged for the night, and then the next morning they would continue their journey. His only fear was that Fang Yi would finally say that they had arrived. In the middle of this cozy surrounding, the Emperor's imperial order, the Forty-two-chapter Sutra, the Old Emperor on Mount Wutai, everything was pushed away to the back of his mind. In his daze, he did not know how many days had passed.

Toward the evening one day, the carriage and the horses finally arrived on the ocean's shore. Taking his hand along, Fang Yi walked to the seaside and softly whispered in his ear, "Good *Didi* [younger brother], what do you say you and I board a ship, roaming the four seas, passing the days just like deities?" While saying that, she held his hand and rested her head on his shoulder.

Her body was so soft that it felt like she did not have any strength. Wei Xiaobao stretched out his left arm around her waist, to guard against her falling down. He felt her silky hair

brushing against his cheek, her waist was so soft and tender, shivering slightly. Although the thought of boarding a ship and sailing to the sea was a bit too overwhelming, plus he had a faint feeling that something was not right, but at this time and this place, how could he bear to say this one word 'no'?

A large ship was anchored by the seaside. Seeing Fang Yi's subordinates waving dark green cloth, the sailors on the ship lowered a small boat to meet them at the shore. First they took Wei Xiaobao and Fang Yi on board, and then successively brought the rest of the people on board. Seeing they were about to embark on a voyage, Yu Ba said that he was seasick and would not want to go to the sea no matter what. Wei Xiaobao did not force him, he gave him a hundred *taels* of silver. With a thousand gratitude and ten thousand thanks, Yu Ba returned to Shanxi.

As Wei Xiaobao entered the cabin, he noticed that it was luxuriously furnished; the floor was covered in thick carpet, there were tea, fruits and delicacies on the table, just like the parlor in the homes of princes, dukes, or high ranking officials. He mused, "Good *Jiejie* is treating me like this, inevitably there will be an intention to harm me."

Two servants on the ship offered steamed towel for the two of them to wipe their faces with, followed by the serving of two bowls of noodles. The noodles were covered with shredded chicken; it was very delicious, the taste was different from ordinary noodles. And then he felt the hull swayed, obviously they set sail and went out to sea.

As the boat left the shore, another world was before their eyes. Fang Yi accompanied him drinking wine and playing finger-guessing game, they never stopped talking and laughing until very late at night. She took care of him first and tucked him into bed before retreating to separate room to rest for the night. The next day, she came back to help him dress and

combed his hair. Wei Xiaobao thought, "Until now she does not know that I am not a eunuch; she only knew that our being husband and wife is a fake. When should I tell her the truth?"

The boat sailed for several days. One particular day the two of them were leaning on the window, enjoying the sunset on the sea. They saw the reflection of the sun like tens of thousands golden snake slithering on the surface of the sea, it was indescribably weird and wonderful. Fang Yi sighed and said, "When I go to assassinate the Tatar Emperor that day, I was so sure that I would lose my life in the Palace. Who would have known that *Laotianye* still protected me, unexpectedly I met you and today we enjoy this good fortune together. Good *Didi*, I am not clear of your lot in life. When did you enter the Palace? How did you learn martial art?"

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "I was just going to tell you, but I was afraid you might jump in fright, or perhaps you are so happy that you pass out."

Fang Yi leaned closer to him; with a low voice she said, "If I like what I hear, that will be best. But even if I don't like what I hear, I only want you to tell me the truth, then ... then I won't care."

"Good *Jiejie*," Wei Xiaobao said, "I will be honest with you, I was born in Yangzhou, Mama is from a brothel."

Fang Yi was shocked; with a trembling voice she asked, "What is your mama doing in the brothel? Is she doing laundry, cook rice, or ... or sweep the floor and pour tea?”

Wei Xiaobao saw her countenance underwent great change, her eyes showed a frightened look, instantly his heart turned ice-cold, knowing that she extremely despised the ‘brothel’. If he said honestly that his own mother was a prostitute, perhaps for the rest of his life she would never have even half a part of respect and affection. Immediately he laughed aloud and said,

“When my Mama entered the brothel, she was only six or seven years old, how could she did laundry or cook rice for the people?”

Fang Yi’s countenance softened somewhat; “She was only six or seven years old?” she asked.

Wei Xiaobao said whatever came into his mind, “After the Tatars entered the Pass, they killed not a few people in Yangzhou; do you know this?” While saying that, his mind was trying to find a way to raise his mother’s dignity somewhat.

“That’s right,” Fang Yi said.

“My (maternal) grandfather was a high ranking official of the Ming Dynasty,” Wei Xiaobao said, “He took office in Yangzhou. When the Tatars broke through Yangzhou, my grandfather died in the resistance against the enemy. That time my Mama was only a little girl, wandering destitute on the street. There was a heroic, rich brothel’s patron who took pity on her, so he took her to become his servant girl. Upon further inquiry, he had a deep respect toward grandfather, so he took my Mama as his foster daughter [orig. yi nu – righteous female/daughter] and brought her home. My Mama became a ‘thousand gold’ young lady, later she married my Papa, who was a *gongzi* [young master/son of nobility] of Yangzhou’s famous and rich family.”

Fang Yi was half-believing, half-doubting. “So that’s how it is,” she said, “You did indeed scare me that I jumped in fright, thinking that your Mama was destitute in the brothel, being female maid of the people, serving those people who knew no shame, an extremely … bad woman.”

Growing up in the brothel, Wei Xiaobao had never thought that his own Mama was a ‘bad woman who knew no shame’, hearing Fang Yi said such things, he could not help but was secretly angry. He said in his heart, “Do you think your Mu Palace women are so great? Damn it, in my opinion they are

also people who knew no shame, extremely whatever.”

Originally he was thinking of telling her his real life story in a calm, undisturbed manner, and would not hide anything from her; but now he simply boasted unguardedly, telling her how extravagant was his family in Yangzhou, giving her an exaggerated account of everything. But when he told about the halls and the rooms of his residence, the setup of the furniture, inevitably he was talking about the layout of the Lovely Spring Courtyard.

But Fang Yi did not pay any attention to his story; she said, “Is this the thing you meant when you said that you wanted to tell me something that will make me happy that I might pass out?”

Wei Xiaobao felt as if she was splashing a bucket of cold water on his head. Also, noticing how indifferent she was toward his bragging, he could not restrain his excitement from dying out; he was disinclined to tell her that he was not an eunuch. “That was it,” he said casually, “Turns out you are not happy at all.”

Fang Yi said unenthusiastically, “I am happy.” It was clear that she did not mean it.

The two of them were silent for a moment. Suddenly a stretch of land appeared on the northeastern direction. This ship was heading exactly on that direction. Fang Yi said in amazement, “Uh, what kind of place is that?”

Less than two hours later, they were getting closer to the land, and saw the verdant trees on the shore, which stretched out in both direction as far as eyes could see, the beach was covered in snow white fine sands. Fang Yi said, “We have been sailing for a few days, our heads are muddled, what do you say we go up and look around?”

“Very good,” Wei Xiaobao happily said, “It looks like a big island, I wonder if there is some fun things on the island.”

Fang Yi summoned the helmsman to the cabin and asked him the name of the island, as well as its specialty. The helmsman replied, “In answer to Miss’ question, this island is a well-known immortal island of the Eastern Sea. I heard there are immortal fruits on the island, those who ate it will have long life and won’t grow old, it’s just that only blessed people will be able to obtain it. There is no harm in Miss and Wei Xianggong to go up and try your luck.”

Fang Yi nodded. When the helmsman had left the cabin, she softly said, “I don’t care about long life and won’t grow old. These last few days I am happier than being an immortal.”

Wei Xiaobao was ecstatic; he said, “You and I can live on the island for the rest of our lives. Immortal fruits and what not, it’s not a big deal, as long as you are willing for accompany me forever, I feel like an immortal.”

Fang Yi leaned closer to him and said in gentle voice, “Me too.”

The two of them rode a small boat to go ashore, and treaded on the fine sand of the beach. Their noses caught the whiff of fragrance of flowers floating from the forest. They felt they had indeed arrived at a fairyland. “I wonder if there are people living on this island?” Fang Yi said.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “I don’t think there are people, but there is a fairy whose beauty is matchless, taking her little servant along, who has just arrived on the island.”

With a very sweet smile Fang Yi said, “Good *Didi*, you are my little servant, and I am your little maid.”

When Wei Xiaobao heard the word ‘maid’, Wei Xiaobao suddenly remembered Shuang’er. Turning his head around, he did not see her following to the island. These past few days he had given Shuang’er a cold treatment, in his heart he was quite remorseful, but thinking that if she tagged along, he would not be too comfortable to be affectionate toward Fang Yi; hence it

was better that she did not come along.

Hand in hand the two of them entered the forest, the air was very thick with the fragrance of the flowers. Wei Xiaobao said, “This fragrance of the flowers is exceptionally thick, could the flowers be immortal flowers?” Taking a few steps forward, suddenly he heard rustling noise of the grass, followed by a yellow shadow flashed before his eyes, seven or eight yellow with black stripes vipers fled out. “Aiyo!” Wei Xiaobao cried out. Pulling Fang Yi’s hand, he turned around and ran. But after taking only one step, seven or eight snakes blocked their way, their bodies were blood red, their tongues flicking in and out, hissing noisily. The snakes’ heads were all triangular, an obvious sign that they all had acute poison.

Fang Yi stepped in front of Wei Xiaobao’s body, pulling her saber and brandishing it she called out, “Run away quickly, I’ll block the vipers!”

But how could Wei Xiaobao be willing to forgo *yi qi* like this, running for his life alone? Busily he drew his dagger and said, “We’ll go from this side!” Pulling Fang Yi along, he bolted off to the side. But after only two steps, he felt something cold on his neck, a snake dangled down from a tree and coiled itself around his neck, scaring him that his soul flew out to the sky, he cried out loudly.

Fang Yi reached out to pull the snake’s body. “No, you can’t do that!” Wei Xiaobao cried out. The snake turned its head around and bit the back of Fang Yi’s hand firmly and did not let her go. Wei Xiaobao brandished the dagger and chopped the snake’s head clean. By this time, a viper had wrapped itself on each one of their legs. Wei Xiaobao brandished his dagger to chop their heads, but he felt his left leg went numb, a viper had bitten him.

Fang Yi tossed away her single-blade saber and embraced him, crying, “We, husband and wife, will die in here today.”

Relying on the sharpness of his dagger, Wei Xiaobao chopped one snake with every wave of the dagger, but more and more snakes came out of the forest. The two of them desperately trying to get out of the forest, their bodies had been bitten seven eight times each. Wei Xiaobao felt a dizzy spell, he was gradually losing his consciousness. Looking toward the ocean, he saw the little boat was sailing back to the big ship, it was already quite some distance away from the shore. Fang Yi called several times, but how could the sailors on the boat hear her?

Fang Yi rolled up Wei Xiaobao's trouser, she bent down and sucked up the snake venom from his leg. Wei Xiaobao was startled, "No … don't!" he said.

Suddenly they heard footsteps behind them, someone was saying, "What are you doing here? Aren't you afraid to die?"

Wei Xiaobao turned his head around, and saw three middle-aged men. "*Dashu* [big uncle] help," he hastily called out, "We are bitten by the snakes."

One man took out a pill from his pocket, put it in his own mouth and chewed it for a moment, and then spread it on the snake bites on Wei Xiaobao's body. Wei Xiaobao said, "Please … please help her first." By now his own legs had already turned black, his entire body had lost its senses. Fang Yi received the medicine from the man and applied it on her own wounds. "Good *Jiejie* …" Wei Xiaobao said, his eyes blackened, 'crash!' with a loud cry he fell backward.

When he woke up, he felt his lips were parched and his tongue dry, there was a sharp pain on the pit of his stomach; he could not help but groaning loudly. He heard someone spoke, "Good, you're awake!" Wei Xiaobao slowly opened his eyes, and saw someone with a bowl of medicine, which he held in front of Wei Xiaobao's mouth. This medicine was exceptionally smelly, but without hesitation he drank it down. As it entered his mouth, it tasted strangely bitter. After he

finished the medicine, he said, “Thank you *Dashu*, for saving my life. I … how is my Jiejie?”

“Fortunately we saved you in time,” the man replied, “If we arrived just a bit late, the two of you would have lost your lives. You are too daring, why did you come to this immortal island?”

Hearing Fang Yi was saved, Wei Xiaobao was greatly relieved, he did not stop expressing his gratitude. Only then did he realize that he was lying underneath a quilt, his entire clothes were gone, his legs were still numb. The man’s appearance was unsightly, his face was full of scars, but in Wei Xiaobao’s eyes, he looked like a Bodhisattva who saved his life. He let out a breath and said, “The sailors on the ship said that there are immortal fruits on this island, those who ate it will have long life and won’t grow old.”

“Hey,” the man laughed, “If there were indeed such immortal fruits, why didn’t they come to pick the fruits themselves?”

“Aiyo!” Wei Xiaobao exclaimed, “Those sailors harbor malicious intentions. I still have a companion on the ship, I am afraid ... I am afraid she might fall into those bad people's hands. *Dashu*, please think of a way to rescue her."

The ugly man said, "That ship has already left three days ago, how could I find it?"

Wei Xiaobao was puzzled; "Three days ago?" he asked in bewilderment.

The ugly man said, "You have been in coma for three whole days and nights, most likely you did not know it?"

Although Shuang'er's martial art skill was high, she was all alone on the boundless ocean, how could she escape the wicked men's evil scheme? Remembering her, Wei Xiaobao could not help but was very anxious. The ugly man comforted him, "Feeling anxious this moment is useless. You'd better take a good rest, the snakes on this island are not a small matter,

you will need at least seven days of treatment before the venom can be eradicated." He asked Wei Xiaobao's name, and introduced himself as having a surname of Pan.

By the third day, Wei Xiaobao was able to get up and walk slowly by holding on to the wall. The ugly man surnamed Pan took him to see Fang Yi. Turned out she was being taken care of by another woman, but her jade countenance was wan and sallow, her spirit was weary. When the two of them met, they were both happy and grieved at the same time, and thus they embraced each other and cried together. Henceforth the two of them share the same room during the day. When talking about the fierceness of the vipers' venom, the hair on their bodies stood up.

By the sixth day, the man surnamed Pan said, "The physician of our island, Mr. Lu, has returned from his journey out to the sea, I have already invited him to examine Wei Xiongdi." Wei Xiaobao thanked him.

Not too long afterwards, a man in his forties walked in, he dressed as a scholar, his expression is friendly; he asked Wei Xiaobao how the snakes bit him. He said, "The residents of this island always have realgar snake medicine handy, when this medicine is applied on the vipers, the snakes will immediately run away, and will not dare to bite people."

"So that's how it is," Wei Xiaobao said, "No wonder Pan *Dage* and the others are not afraid."

Mr. Lu examined his wound, and took out six pills, he said, "You take three pills, and give the other three to your companion. Take one pill every day."

Wei Xiaobao thanked him profusely. He took out two hundred *taels* worth of banknotes. "A little bit of treatment fee," he said, "I ask Mister not to laugh."

Mr. Lu was startled; he said, "Why so much? *Gongzi* gives me

two *taels*, and I am already grateful." Wei Xiaobao insisted on giving him the whole thing, Mr. Lu thanked him and accepted. He said with a laugh, "*Gongzi* is so generous, to refuse would be impolite. Perhaps *Gongzi* feels stifled staying here, what do you say tonight *Gongzi* and your female companion come to my humble home to have a cup of wine?" Wei Xiaobao was delighted and readily accepted the invitation.

That evening, Mr. Lu sent two sedan chairs to pick up Wei Xiaobao and Fang Yi. These bamboo sedan chairs were actually bamboo chairs with two bamboo poles attached on each side, carried by two men, one in the front and the other on the back. The residents of the island were simple and crude, they did not have real sedan chairs.

The two sedan chairs travelled along a mountain stream. The water of the creek gurgled, the vegetation was fresh and clean, they both felt completely relax. Only when they saw tall grass did Wei and Fang, two people, shuddered in apprehension, for fear that some vipers would come out of the grass. After traveling for seven, eight *li*, the sedan chairs arrived in front of a cluster of three bamboo buildings. The building's walls and roofs were made of coarse bamboo poles about the size of a bowl in diameter weaved together, it looked very firm and solid. Wei Xiaobao had never seen a bamboo construction like this in Jiangnan and Hebei [Translator's note: I am not sure about this. Jiangnan can also mean 'south of Yangtze', Hebei can also mean 'north of yellow river'.]

Mr. Lu went out to welcome them, and invited the two of them to enter. At the hall, a woman in her thirties came out to welcome the guests, she was Mr. Lu's wife. The woman pulled Fang Yi's hand; she appeared very friendly. Mr. Lu invited Wei Xiaobao to sit in his study room.

The bamboo bookshelf in the study room was full of books, the four walls were also full of hanging calligraphy and painting,

apparently Mr. Lu was an elegant scholar. Mr. Lu said, "*Zaixia* is an uncouth resident of a barren island, extremely ill-informed and narrow-minded. Wei *Gongzi* came from a well-known scenic spot on the Central Plains, a younger generation of a noble family, your view must be broad, your appreciation must be exquisite. Please look at these several painting and calligraphy; in your opinion, will they be passable to enter your house?"

These several sentences were scholarly talk, Wei Xiaobao did not understand even half a sentence, but seeing he was pointing to the painting and calligraphy on the wall, he looked up and saw a scenery painting [orig. mountain and water], and another one with painting of red-crowned crane and a turtle. He laughed and said, "That old turtle looks very amusing."

Mr. Lu was slightly startled; he pointed to a scroll on the table and asked, "Wei *Gongzi*, what do you think of my Shigu script[102]?"

Wei Xiaobao saw the characters were curvy, just like the writing on a talisman. He nodded and said, "Good, very good!"

Mr. Lu pointed to another scroll of large brush-written characters; he said, "This painting is Qin Dynasty's stone engrave of Lang Ya [clean and white ivory] Platform, what does Wei *Gongzi* think about it?"

Wei Xiaobao thought that if he blindly agreed to everything, it would not be interesting, so he shook his head and said, "This calligraphy is not too good."

Mr. Lu felt a deep veneration as he said, "Would Wei *Gongzi* please give directions? Where is the faulty stroke and weak points of this calligraphy?"

"There are too many faulty strokes, there are too little superb strokes!" Wei Xiaobao said. He thought that since there are 'faulty stroke', then naturally there are 'superb stroke' as well.

It was the very first time that Mr. Lu heard the term 'superb stroke', he was taken aback and was at a loss momentarily.

"Brilliant, brilliant!" he said. Pointing to a grass script calligraphy on the western wall, he said, "This is wild grass script, what does Wei *Gongzi* think about it?"

Cocking his head, Wei Xiaobao looked at the painting for a moment, and then he shook his head and said, "These several characters are out of ink, you should rub some more ink stick. Um, this thread here is being dragged here and there, but you did not wipe it clean."

As soon as Mr. Lu heard this, his countenance changed greatly. Grass script pays particular attention to the application of dry and wet ink. When the brush is moist, the character is wet, when the brush is dried up, the character looks parched; dry and wet alternates, creating delicate shades of strokes. There is conspicuous wetness in the dry character, and contrasting dry stroke in the wet character, *yin* and *yang* complements each other, just like the red cloud obstructing the sky, the square makes a wonderful letter. As for the thread of strokes joined together, calligraphers call it 'transparent' lines; sometimes it joins several brush strokes together, sometimes it joins several letters together. Particular attention must be paid to both sides, the angles change irregularly, sometimes the brush floats, or turns abruptly to create all kinds of different look. By saying those words, Wei Xiaobao had revealed his background.

Mr. Lu pointed to another scroll of calligraphy and said, "This one is entirely oracle bone inscriptions, *Xiongdi*'s knowledge is shallow, I don't even know a single character, would Wei *Gongzi* please give directions?"

Wei Xiaobao saw that all characters on the paper look like tadpoles, just like the characters engraved on the stone tablet in the Pu Ji Temple on Jinxiu Peak of Mount Wutai; his heart was

moved, he said, "I know these several characters, it says 'Hong Jiaozhu of Shen Long Jiao will not be old for ten thousand years, he will enjoy the good fortune of the immortals forever, his magical power is extensive, his long-life is the same as the Heaven's'."

A delighted expression spread across Mr. Lu's face; he said, "Thank Heaven and thank the Earth, you indeed know these characters!"

Seeing his extreme delight, so much so that his voice was trembling, Wei Xiaobao's suspicion arose: "I only know several characters, why is he this happy? Could it be that he also belongs to Shen Long Jiao? Aiyo, not good! Snake ... snake ... spirit snake ... could it be that this is the Divine Dragon Island?" He blurted out, "Where is Fat Toutuo?"

Mr. Lu was shocked; he withdrew several steps and with a trembling voice said, "You ... you know it?"

Wei Xiaobao nodded. Actually, he did not know anything. Mr. Lu's expression became serious as he said, "Since you know it, then it's very good." Walking toward the desk, he ground some ink and said, "Please translate these tadpole scripts one by one. Which one is 'Hong' character, which one is 'Jiao' character?" Lifting the brush, he beckoned him to come over.

Asking Wei Xiaobao to take up a pen to write was more cruel than asking him to surrender his life. Wei Xiaobao groaned inwardly, but seeing Mr. Lu's unsightly expression, he did not dare to disobey. Bracing himself, he walked over to the desk and sat down. He took the pen and held it inside his fist. The way he hold the pen was thirty percent similar to holding chopsticks when he eat, but the way he clench his fist was also similar to the way people holding a knife to butcher a pig, or holding a hammer to pound the nail; how could there be such a way to hold the pen in the world?

Mr. Lu's angry look was growing, he struggled hard to control it. Slowly he said, "Write down your name first!"

Wei Xiaobao suddenly stood up and tossed the pen onto the floor, the ink splattered everywhere, he said in a loud voice, "*Laozi* does not know dog's fart, I can't write 'fart' character. All those 'Hong Jiaozhu's long-life is the same as the Heaven's', *laozi* was simply boasting unguardedly to swindle that bad *toutuo*. If you want *laozi* to write, wait for my next reincarnation. You want to kill me or chop me, if *laozi* even frown, just consider me not a real man."

Mr. Lu coldly said, "You don't know any character?"

"I don't," Wei Xiaobao replied, "I don't know the 'gui'' character from your turtle [wu gui] or the 'dan' character from your bast@rd [wang ba dan]." Since his trickery had been unmasked, his shame turned into anger. Besides, he was on Snake Island, there was only death for him without any chance to live. Begging for mercy was useless, he might as well took some advantage first.

Mr. Lu was silent for half a day. He picked up the brush and wrote several tadpole characters on the paper. "What characters are these?" he asked.

"F*ck your mother!" Wei Xiaobao said in loud voice, "I said I don't know, that means I don't know. Do you think I am lying?"

Mr. Lu nodded. "Very well," he said, "Turns out Fat Toutuo has fallen into your big trick. But this matter has been reported to Jiaozhu. Little thief!" Suddenly he pounced and wrapped his fingers around Wei Xiaobao’s neck, his hands squeezed tighter and tighter. With a clenched teeth he said, “You have made us cheating Jiaozhu, everybody will die without a burial site because of you. It would be better if we will all die together to avoid those endless, ruthless punishment.”

Strangled by him, Wei Xiaobao could not breathe, his face

swollen purple, his tongue stuck out. If Mr. Lu added a little bit more force into his hands, this child would take his last breath and die. Thinking that he had an enormous responsibility in this matter, he was startled and immediately released his fingers. Pushing with both hands, he sent Wei Xiaobao tumbling to the floor, and then filled with hatred, he left the room.

After quite a long time, Wei Xiaobao was finally able to get up. "Dead turtle, f*ck his thief mother," perhaps he uttered these curses several hundred times, while thinking that since he was on this poisonous Snake Island, there was no other place he could escape to. If he ran toward the underbrush in the woods, he would die even faster. Walking toward the door, he pushed the door only to find that the bamboo door was barred from the outside. Looking out of the window, he saw a deep valley. Indeed there was no way out. Turning his head around, he saw the calligraphy and painting hanging on the wall. "What's so good about these fart characters and fart drawings?" he mused. Picking up the brush, he dipped it into the ink, and drew countless 'big turtles' and 'little turtles' on each scroll of calligraphy and paintings.

After drawing several dozen turtles, Wei Xiaobao's hand was tired, he tossed the pen to the floor and curled up in a chair, very soon he fell asleep. When he woke up, the sky had turned dark, but unexpectedly nobody came to check him up. His tummy was growling from hunger. "This green-haired turtle wants to starve *laozi* to death," he mused.

After a long time, he suddenly heard footsteps outside the door, and saw light penetrating the cracks on the door, followed by the bamboo door was pushed open and Mr. Lu entered the room with a candle in his hand. He cast him a sidelong glance. Wei Xiaobao saw there was no trace of anger on his face, so the fear in his heart subsided considerably.

Mr. Lu put the candle on the table, took a quick glance around

the room, and saw that Wei Xiaobao had smeared the calligraphy and paintings hanging on the walls so that they were no longer presentable. He could not restrain his anger from flaring up. “You … you …” he shouted, while raising his hand high, ready to strike down, but his palm stopped midair. Finally he was able to control his anger and said, “You … you …” the word choked in his throat and he could not speak.

“What do you think?” Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, “Is my drawing good?”

Mr. Lu heaved a deep sigh, he sat down dejectedly and said, “Good, your drawing is good.”

Surprisingly, not only he did not hit him, but he said his drawing was good. It was completely beyond Wei Xiaobao’s anticipation. Seeing his distressed expression, Wei Xiaobao knew Mr. Lu was extremely troubled, he could not help but somehow feel sorry. “Mr. Lu,” he said, “I … I’m sorry, I destroyed your paintings.”

Mr. Lu shook his head. “No … it’s nothing,” he said. He crouched on the table with his head between his hands. After quite a while, he said, “You must be hungry, let’s eat first and we’ll talk later.”

In the reception room, four dishes and a bowl of soup were arranged on the table; there were chicken and fish, the dishes were sumptuous. Soon afterwards Fang Yi and Mrs. Lu came out to accompany them. Four people ate dinner together.

Wei Xiaobao was greatly surprised, “Could it be that my dozens of turtle drawings are so good and Mr. Lu is so happy that he invited me to eat?” But he had a vague understanding in his heart that the situation did not always look like it really was. Several times he opened his mouth wanting to ask, but seeing Mr. Lu’s mixed [orig. ‘cloudy and clear’] expression, he was afraid to provoke his anger; he had not ate his fill, Mr. Lu

might snatch his bowl away, then it would not be worth it. Thereupon he held his peace and ate in silence until he was full.

After dinner, Mr. Lu took him back to the study room. Mr. Lu picked up the brush from the floor and wrote ‘Wei Xiaobao’ three characters on the paper. “This is your own name,” he said, “Can you write it yourself or not?”

“It recognizes me, but I don’t recognize it,” Wei Xiaobao replied, “How can I write it?”

“Hm,” Mr. Lu looked out the window and was deep in thought for half a day. With his left hand he picked up the candle and walked toward the tadpole script calligraphy. Carefully he looked at it, pointed to the characters one by one, while with his mouth he read the characters. Returning to the table, he fetched a blank piece of paper, lifted up his brush and started to scribble rapidly. He counted the number of tadpole characters with his index finger, and then counted the number of characters he wrote on the paper. And then he rapidly scribbled again on the paper, turned his head around to look at the tadpole characters, all the while he was mumbling to himself, “Those three characters are identical, these two look the same. It must be flawless, or it won’t be believable!” He pondered for half a day, then scribbled again on the paper, and said delightedly, “Got it!”

Wei Xiaobao did not know what trick he was playing, but he did not care since his tummy was full. He saw Mr. Lu picked up another sheet of blank paper and then carefully wrote several characters. This time he wrote very slowly. Finished writing, he softly read what he wrote, swaying his head rhythmically. Wei Xiaobao only heard words like ‘Divine Dragon Island’, ‘Hong Jiaozhu’, ‘long life the same as the heaven’s’, and so on. Finally he heard something like ‘the first copy is in such and such place on such and such mountain’, ‘the second copy is in such and such place on such and such mountain’. Suddenly it dawned on

him that those words were the exact words he boasted wildly to Fat Toutuo at the Pu Ji Temple. Unexpectedly Fat Toutuo believed it wholeheartedly and spread it out as soon as he returned here. He also thought, “That day Fat Toutuo invited me to the Divine Dragon Island to see Hong Jiaozhu. I told him that I did not want to come, no matter what. Unexpectedly, with the demons and deities at work, the ship was sailing to this place. Now that my trickery is exposed, Hong Jiaozhu will know about it. He will definitely throw a fit; perhaps he would throw Good *Jiejie* and me to the snake pit, so that tens of thousands of vipers could feast on us that even our bones cannot be saved.” Thinking about endless stream of poisonous snakes crawling over his body, he was shivering all over although it was not cold.

Mr. Lu turned around with a very pleased-of-himself expression on his face. He smiled and said, “Wei *Gongzi*, you know the tadpole script written on the stone tablet, it is certainly a cause of delight and a reason to congratulate you. It is also our Cult’s Hong Jiaozhu’s flood of good fortunes fills up the heavens that such a child prodigy like you dropped in from the sky, that you are able to read the tadpole script.”

“Humph,” Wei Xiaobao snorted, “You don’t need to make fun of me,” he said, “How could I tell tadpole script from frog script? *Laozi* did not even know scabies toad script. I was simply talking nonsense to swindle that thin, bamboo-pole like *toutuo*.”

Mr. Lu smiled and said, “Wei *Gongzi*, why be too modest? This is simply the writings on the stone tablet that I wrote down from memory. I am asking for *Gongzi*’s direction whether I made any mistake or not.” Finished speaking, he started reciting: “In the tenth month of the Zhen Guan’s second year Jiazi[103] of the Great Tang, Distinguished (National) Duke Wei, Li Jing, along with Chief of Right Army Great General (National) Duke Su, Cheng Zhijie, Glorious Grand Master Ministry of War

Duke Shang Shoucao, Li Ji, Commander-in-chief of Xuzhou (National) Duke Hu, Qin Shubao, had visited the Jinxiu Peak of Mount Wutai, to see the glorious red eastern sky, which appeared like big golden lettering on the border of the clouds, the writing says: 'In a thousand years, there will be the Great Qing. In the East, there will be an island, Divine Dragon is its name. A certain Hong Jiaozhu will obtain favor, his supernatural spirit reaches out to relieve, his grand, awe-inspiring might is all powerful. Subduing monsters conquering demons like a rising sun. The feathered wings support his rule, breathing out stale air and breathing in fresh air. Ten thousands luck a hundred good fortune, there will never be a year without plentiful harvest. He will enjoy immortal happiness forever, universal evil spirit will venerate him. His long life will be the same as the Heaven's, a kind sage of both pen and sword.' In a moment, dark green characters appeared in the sky, the writing says: 'The Heaven bestows this certain Hong by eight copies of the Forty-two-chapter Sutra. The first is stored in Dang Mo Temple [lit. sweeping away demons] on Mount Funiu in Henan, the second is kept in Tianxin Nunnery [lit. center of the sky, the will of heaven] on Mount Bijia in Shanxi, the third is in Ling Xiao Taoist Monastery [lit. rising high firmament] on Mount Qingcheng in Sichuan. The fourth is kept in Shaolin Temple on Mount Songshan in Henan, the fifth in Zhenwu Taoist Monastery on Wudang Mountain in Hubei, the sixth is stored in Jiaye Buddhist Temple in Kongtong, Sichuan border. The seventh is in Mu Palace, Kunming of Yunnan, the eighth is in Ping Xi Wang Mansion of Kunming, Yunnan.' This tranquil revelation by the Heaven is engraved on the stone tablet, waiting for the future."

Mr. Lu read in a pattern of falling, remaining even, and rising in pitch and rhythm. When he finished, he asked, "Is there any mistake?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "That was a stone tablet from the Tang Dynasty, how did they know that in later generation there will

be Ping Xi Wang Wu Sangui?”

Mr. Lu replied, “God is intelligent and wise, He is omniscient, nothing escape his knowledge. Since He knew that in later generation there will be Hong Jiaozhu, naturally He also had foreknowledge of Wu Sangui.”

Wei Xiaobao was secretly amused; he nodded his head and said, “That’s true.” While in his heart he thought, “I wonder what trick are you playing?”

Mr. Lu said, “The inscription on this stone tablet must be accurate to the last character. Although Wei *Gongzi* is gifted and smart, but in my opinion, it was also the holy spirits at work, so that you understand these tadpole script. Someday in the future, perhaps some mistakes will be found. It would be best if Wei *Gongzi* know this writing inside-out, so that when Hong Jiaozhu summons you, you can recite it from memory fluently. If Hong Jiaozhu is happy, naturally he will heap you with rewards.”

Wei Xiaobao rolled his eyes; immediately he understood. Repeatedly nodding his head, he said, “So that’s how it is, so that’s how it is!” He guessed that Fat Toutuo and Mr. Lu had reported to Hong Jiaozhu, telling him that a child knew the writing on a stone tablet, hence Hong Jiaozhu was determined to summon him to verify. Who would have thought that it was entirely bogus? Mr. Lu was afraid the Cult Leader would place the blame on him, he had no choice but to forge the inscription on the stone tablet to deceive the Cult Leader.

Mr. Lu said, “And now I will read one sentence, Wei *Gongzi* reads one sentence, always remember to read it correctly from start to finish. ‘In the tenth month of the Zhen Guan’s second year Jiazi of the Great Tang …’”

Wei Xiaobao did not want to read, he did not have the ability, much less wanted to be in cahoots with Mr. Lu in deceiving

Hong Jiaozhu; but he thought it was amusing, so he repeat after Mr. Lu anyway.

His natural disposition was quick-witted and clever, for him, listening to a segment of several hundred characters and then repeating it, would not require the least bit of effort, but asking him to study was akin to asking for his life. Although this segment of writing was only several hundred characters long, it had sentences that were very difficult to pronounce, with the meanings that were even harder to comprehend, for instance ‘his grand, awe-inspiring might is all powerful', 'breathing out stale air and breathing in fresh air'; he was completely clueless as to their meaning. Therefore, he did not have any choice but to follow Mr. Lu one sentence at a time. Fortunately, Mr. Lu did not mind the repetition and he was very patient in instructing him. Nevertheless, it took more than thirty times going through the entire writings before he could recite it without any mistake.

That evening he slept in Mr. Lu's home, the next morning he recited again. Seeing he was able to memorize everything, Mr. Lu was very pleased, thereupon he picked up a pen and a sheet of paper and started to write the tadpole characters one by one, asking him to identify which one was the 'wei' character, which one was the 'zhen' character. This time Wei Xiaobao could not help but whining incessantly. These tadpole characters twisted to the left and to the right, they all looked almost the same. Asking Wei Xiaobao to tell one character from the other and rewrite it one by one was as hard as asking him to climb the heaven, as painful as having his head chopped off. He was not able to sit quietly even for a moment, how could he have the patience to learn the tadpole script?

While Wei Xiaobao was frowning and worried, Mr. Lu was even more anxious. By this time Mr. Lu was already aware that the inscription on the stone tablet had a totally different meaning.

He had counted the number of characters from the rubbing Fat Toutuo obtained from the stone tablet, and had composed another set of writings as best as he could, with only the exact number of characters as the rubbing, with the sole purpose to win Hong Jiaozhu's favor, he could not care about what the original inscription really mean. Composing the writing this way, naturally there were hundreds of holes in his work. For example, in the sentence 'In the tenth month of the Zhen Guan’s second year Jiazi of the Great Tang', the word 'second' (二) was the sixth character, but on the stone tablet, the sixth character had altogether eighteen strokes, no matter how you say it, it could not be a 'second' character. The fifth character only had three strokes, so it would be extremely hard to say that it was the 'Guan' (观) character. However, taking everything into consideration, even if Mr. Lu had more talent, he could not possibly fabricate a flawless article in such a short time. Hong Jiaozhu was extremely intelligent, most probably this fake article would not escape his eyes, but with the imminent great catastrophe, it was the best he could do to avoid it for the time being. About the disaster of the future, he had no choice but to wait and see.

Teaching Wei Xiaobao to write that day, the progress was painstakingly slow. By afternoon, he could only write four characters. Luckily that the tadpole characters looked very strange to begin with, so that with Wei Xiaobao's extremely ugly penmanship, the characters did not look too unsightly. If it were regular script, and it was written by a child who had never learned to write, people would be able to see if it was true or bogus as soon as they saw it.

That afternoon he learned three more characters. That evening he learned two more. That day he learned nine characters altogether. Wei Xiaobao did not stop making loud ruckus and shouting, several times he threw the brush and refused to learn. Mr. Lu threatened him, coaxed him, finally he

asked Fang Yi to come and sit by his side to keep him company, only then did Wei Xiaobao reluctantly able to endure and continue to study.

While teaching him, Mr. Lu was anxious, he was afraid Hong Jiaozhu would summon him at any time. If Wei Xiaobao had not finished learning the entire writings and the Cult Leader already summoned him, no doubt Wei Xiaobao's head could not be guaranteed, but it would also be difficult for his own entire family to avoid losing their lives. However, this learning process could not be hurried at all; the more he was expected to learn faster, the slower Wei Xiaobao's progress was. His brain was stuffed full with these tadpole characters, it was like the tadpoles were actually swimming and moving, so that it was really hard for him to differentiate one character from another.

After studying for several days, the viper bite injury on Wei Xiaobao's body was completely healed, but after so much difficulty, he only managed to learn about twenty, thirty characters; not only that, he was so confused that out of ten characters, often times he would make seven or eight mistakes.

While in distress, Mr. Lu suddenly heard Fat Toutuo's voice calling out, "Mr. Lu, Jiaozhu is summoning Wei *Gongzi*!" Mr. Lu's countenance turned ash-grey, his hand trembled, the writing brush, which he had just dipped into ink, fell onto his lapel. An extremely tall and extremely thin man entered the study room, Fat Toutuo had indeed arrived.

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Fat Reverend Monk, how come you have not seen me until today? I have been waiting for you for a long time."

Seeing Mr. Lu's expression, Fat Toutuo knew their important project was far from good; he did not answer Wei Xiaobao, but muttered to himself, "I should have known this little demon was talking nonsense. I was so confused and lost my capacity of clear thinking, in my eagerness to set up a great merit to

protect my own life, unexpectedly I will die sooner instead."

With a cold laugh Mr. Lu said, "You are just a single person, the one surnamed Lu has eight people in my household, all of us will accompany you in delivering our lives."

Fat Toutuo heaved a deep sigh and said, "Everybody's fate should be like this, this is called 'destiny is inexorable, there is no fleeing it'. Even if this matter did not happen, Jiaozhu will not necessarily allow us to live a few days longer."

Mr. Lu cast a quick glance toward Wei Xiaobao; he said, "It's those people who are in power, we are already old, it's time for us to die, what can we do?" The tone of his voice was full of resentment.

Fat Toutuo sighed and said, "I'll say he is young, but happened to obtain a good position, and then he just report everything, disregarding seniority, to our superior. Ay!"

Mr. Lu stared at him for a moment, and then said, "Young people should know their place."

"Lu *Xiong*," Fat Toutuo said, "Things have gotten to this point, you and I have lived and will die together, if real men have to die, we will simply die, what are we afraid of?"

Wei Xiaobao clapped his hands and said, "The Fat Reverend Monk is right, for hero and warrior, what is there to be afraid of? If I am not scared, you must not be scared even more."

"Ignorant child," Mr. Lu said with a sneer, "You don't know the immensity of heaven and earth. By the time you know the meaning of fear, it will be too late." After being lost in thought for half a day, he said, "Fat Reverend Monk, please wait a moment, I have some instructions I'd like to leave to my humble wife."

A moment later, Mr. Lu returned to the study room, there were traces of tears on his face. Fat Toutuo said, "Lu *Xiong*, please

give me one of your Sheng Tian [lit. to ascend to heaven/to die] pills."

Mr. Lu nodded; he took a porcelain bottle from his bosom, pulled the cork, and tipped a red pill out. He gave it to Fat Toutuo and said, "This pill will stop your breathing as soon as it enters your mouth, you must wait for the very last moment, do not act blindly without thinking."

Fat Toutuo received the pill; with a bitter laugh he said, "Many thanks! Fat Toutuo does not consider his own life lightly; I am not in a hurry to ascend to the heavens."

On Mount Wutai, Wei Xiaobao had witnessed Fat Toutuo's awe-inspiring power as he took on the Shaolin Temple's Eighteen Luohan; but now he was asking for a poison. Obviously he would rather kill himself than being blamed by Hong Jiaozhu. Only now did Wei Xiaobao understand the urgency of the situation; he could not help feeling afraid.

The three of them walked out the door. Wei Xiaobao heard a faint weeping sound coming from the inner hall. "Where is Miss Fang?" he asked, "She is not going?"

"Humph," Fat Toutuo snorted, "Your age is so young, but actually are a very affectionate person. On Mount Wutai you had Shuang'er, here you have Miss Fang." With his left hand he grabbed Wei Xiaobao and lifted him up, "Let's go!" he shouted. In large strides he rushed to the east. In just a little while, he had already run faster than a speeding horse. Mr. Lu was also running by his side, he still had a distressed look on his face.

Wei Xiaobao noticed that he appeared effortless; actually he was able to run side-by-side with Fat Toutuo and did not fall behind even for half a step. Only now did Wei Xiaobao realize that this frail-looking scholar actually possessed an excellent martial art skill. "Fat Reverend Monk, Mr. Lu," he said, "The two of you has such a high level of martial art, why would you be

afraid of Hong Jiaozhu? You ..."

Fat Toutuo stretched out his right palm to cover his mouth. "This is the Divine Dragon Island; you dare to say such treason and heresy, are you bored of being alive?" he said angrily.

As soon as his mouth was covered, Wei Xiaobao could not breathe. "Damn it," he cursed in his heart, "You fear Hong Jiaozhu like this, but still call yourself a hero [ying xiong]; a coward [gou xiong] is more appropriate."

The three of them were heading toward a mountain peak on the north. Before long, he saw vipers everywhere; on the trees, in the grass, on the road, one on the east, another on the west. The strange thing was that those vipers did not give the three of them any trouble. After winding around two hillsides, when he looked up, Wei Xiaobao was able to see several big bamboo buildings on the distant peak. Fat Toutuo was carrying Wei Xiaobao toward that peak.

At this moment, the mountain path narrowed, so that Mr. Lu was unable to walk side by side with Fat Toutuo, he fell about a *zhang* behind. Fat Toutuo put his mouth next to Wei Xiaobao's ear and said in a low voice, "Where is your copy of 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'?"

"I don't have it with me," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"Do you have to tell me that?" Fat Toutuo said, "I have already searched you everywhere. Where is it?"

"The Eighteen Luohan of Shaolin Temple have the sutra, naturally they gave it to their Abbot," Wei Xiaobao replied. He thought that since this thin bamboo pole *toutuo* was not a match for the Shaolin's Eighteen Luohan, if he heard that the sutra was in the hands of the Abbot of Shaolin Temple, naturally he would not dare to demand the sutra from the Abbot; even if he dared to demand it, he would definitely be expelled by those Shaolin monks.

That day Fat Toutuo had personally handed the sutra over into Monk Cheng Xin's hand, he did not have the slightest suspicion to Wei Xiaobao's words. He said in a low voice, "When we see Jiaozhu in a moment, you must never mention this matter. Otherwise Jiaozhu might force you to hand over the sutra, and when you cannot give it to him, Jiaozhu will definitely throw you into the vipers' nest."

Wei Xiaobao could hear the fear in his voice, not only that, evidently Fat Toutuo was afraid Mr. Lu would hear him; thereupon he said, "Clearly it was you who seized the sutra from me, and then you gave it to the Shaolin monks, if Jiaozhu finds out, he would definitely throw you into the vipers' nest. Humph, humph, even if he won't punish you for the time being, he would definitely send you to Shaolin Temple to get the sutra back; that would be enough punishment for you."

Fat Toutuo shivered without saying anything. Wei Xiaobao said, "The two of us will deal with this matter together. Whatever happens, you take care of me, I will also take care of you. Otherwise, we split up, and we'll perish together."

From behind Mr. Lu suddenly interrupted, "What split up and perish together?"

Wei Xiaobao said, "The three of us will enjoy blessing and endure misfortune together." Thinking that right now they were in a messy situation, he must not lose his wits; if he could implicate these two martial art masters, he would have a slightly better chance of survival.

Fat Toutuo and Mr. Lu did not say anything. A moment later, they both heaved a deep sigh together.

After walking for the time needed to eat rice, they arrived at the peak. They saw four youngsters in black, hand in hand, came near, each person carried a long sword on his back. The one furthest to the left asked, "Fat Toutuo, what is this little

child doing in here?"

Fat Toutuo let Wei Xiaobao down; he said, "Jiaozhu's order: he is being summoned."

From the west came three young girls in red, laughing and giggling; they also carried long swords on their backs. Seeing the three people, they came over to meet them. A girl said with a laugh, "Fat Toutuo, is he your illegitimate child?" While saying that, she pinched Wei Xiaobao's cheek.

"Miss must be joking," Fat Toutuo said, "This child is being summoned by Jiaozhu, the Senior, there is an important matter he'd like to ask him."

Another girl with round face pinched Wei Xiaobao's right cheek and said with a laugh, "Looking at this baby's appearance, he must be Fat Toutuo's illegitimate child. You can't deny it."

Wei Xiaobao was angry. "I am your illegitimate child," he shouted, "You and Fat Toutuo are having an illicit intercourse and you gave birth to me."

The girls were startled, and then they burst out in laughter. The round-faced girl's turned deep red. She spat and said, "Little demon, you are asking for death!" She raised her hand to strike. Wei Xiaobao leaned his head sideways to dodge. Right this moment more than a dozen young people, boys and girls, had heard the noise and rushed in to tease the round-faced girl. The girl was ashamed and angry, her left foot flew up, she gave Wei Xiaobao's buttocks a hard kick.

"Ma," Wei Xiaobao called out loudly, "Why did you beat your son?" The youngsters laughed even louder.

'Dang, dang, dang!' suddenly the bell tolled; everybody fell silent immediately. These young boys and girls, about twenty in total, rushed toward the bamboo building. Fat Toutuo said, "Jiaozhu is calling an assembly." To Wei Xiaobao he said, "When you see Jiaozhu, you must not speak any nonsense."

Wei Xiaobao saw his melancholy expression. Those youngsters were rather rude toward him; thinking that his martial art skill was extremely high, why would he be afraid of these teenage babies? He could not help but having a pity on him somewhat; thereupon he nodded his head.

He saw from all directions people were streaming into the bamboo building. Fat Toutuo and Mr. Lu also took Wei Xiaobao into the building. Crossing a corridor, suddenly a large hall appeared before his eyes. This hall was incomparably huge, it was big enough to hold a thousand-people assembly. Wei Xiaobao had lived in the Imperial Palace in Beijing for quite a long time, even an assembly hall bigger than this one would not impress him. But this hall was really gigantic, as soon as he saw it, he could not help but had a feeling of respect.

He saw groups of teenagers, boys and girls, wearing five different colors standing on five different locations. The groups wearing blue, white, black, yellow, four colors were all boys, the group wearing red was all girls. Each one carried a long sword on his or her back, each group had approximately a hundred people. On the other end of the big hall there were two bamboo chairs standing side by side, draped in brocade cushion. On both sides of the chair stood several dozen people, men and women; the younger ones were approximately thirty years old, the old ones were about sixty, seventy years old, not one of them carried any weapon. There were about five, six hundred people gathered in the hall, but unexpectedly not the least bit of sound was heard, not even a single cough. Wei Xiaobao cursed in his heart, "Damn it, what an air! You think you are having an audience with the Emperor or what?"

After quite a while, the bells tolled again nine times, there were footsteps from the inner hall. “The ghost Jiaozhu is out,” Wei Xiaobao mused. Who would have thought that ten men came out, all were in their thirties, they wore five different

colors clothes, and then they stood on either side of the chairs, five colors on each side.

After another long while, the bells and the drums were struck together loudly, followed by the tinkling of several hundred small silver bells. Everybody in the hall kneeled down together and chorused, “Jiaozhu will enjoy immortal good fortune forever, his long life the same as the heaven’s.”

Fat Toutuo pulled Wei Xiaobao’s lapel, telling him to kneel down. Wei Xiaobao did not have any choice but kneeling down. He stole a glance and saw a man and a woman came out from the inner hall and sat on the chairs. Another bell stroke, everybody slowly stood up.

The man looked very old, the white hair from his temples drooped down to his chest, his face was full of scars and wrinkles, he looked very ugly; Wei Xiaobao presumed this must be the Cult Leader. The woman, on the other hand, was a good-looking young woman. Looking at her appearance, she was no older than twenty two or twenty three, she was smiling slightly, overflowing with charming attitude, and was incomparably gorgeous. Wei Xiaobao praised in his heart, “She is exceedingly smart-looking! This woman is more beautiful than that Good *Jiejie* of mine. Even in the Imperial Palace or Lovely Spring Courtyard, there is no woman as pretty as she is.”

A man wearing black clothes on the left took two steps forward; holding a piece of dark green paper with both hands he read loudly, “Respectfully reading Hong Jiaozhu’s treasured teaching, whose compassion and kindness illuminate everything, whose power encompasses four directions: ‘Numerous aspirations work as one will be able to build the city, incomprehensible might shakes the world!’”

The crowd in the hall repeated in chorus, “Numerous aspirations work as one will be able to build the city, incomprehensible might shakes the world!”

Wei Xiaobao was mesmerized with the beautiful woman, the voices of the crowd chanting together had startled him that he jumped in fright.

The man in black clothes continued reading, “Jiaozhu’s immortal good fortune is as high as the sky, illuminating the heads of the devoted cult members. Jiaozhu sails the boat steadily for ten thousand years, riding the wind breaking the waves to show off his heroic bravery! Flying to the sky, the divine dragon looks up at him with hope, Jiaozhu’s prestige covers the eight directions. Everybody lives because Jiaozhu lives, everybody dies because Jiaozhu dies, Jiaozhu’s order is to be followed, Jiaozhu is like the light of the sun and the moon!”

As the man read one sentence, the crowd followed by reciting one sentence. Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, “What Hong Jiaozhu’s teaching? A loud blow of his own horn. Our Tian Di Hui’s secret verse is much more pleasant to hear that this.”

When they finished reciting, everybody shouted in one voice, “With Jiaozhu’s treasured teaching always in our hearts, we can set up meritorious deed and subdue the enemy, nothing is unachievable!” Those young boys and girls were particularly enthusiastic in shouting their creeds. Hong Jiaozhu’s ugly face carried an indifferent expression, while the beautiful woman by his side recited with a smile on her face.

Finished reciting, the hall fell into complete silence.

Book note:

When the powerful troops of Luo Shaowei of the late Tang Dynasty took the towns of Wei prefecture, he commanded his five thousand elite troops to kill everything. Afterwards he felt a deep remorse, realizing that he had committed an enormous mistake; he said, “In the forty-three counties of six prefectures, we cannot make the same mistake.” During the time of Wang Mang [usurped power and reign 9-23 AD, between the former

and later Han periods], he cast cooper and iron money into a saber, he then carved characters plated with gold on it, and called the saber ‘Cuo Dao’ [wrong/mistake saber]. Luo Shaowei used the ‘Cuo’ character of the ‘Cuo Dao’ as an analogy of his ‘mistake’, saying that it was such a big mistake that even he amassed all the iron in the forty-three counties of six prefectures, it would be difficult to cast the metal. ‘Nine divisions amass metal to be cast in a row’, the word ‘a row’ is comparable to a big ‘mistake’; the chapter’s title borrows this expression to describe Wei Xiaobao being deceived into coming to the Divine Dragon Island, but without any regret.

During the Warring States period, the Qin State carried out the Shang Yang political reform. Afraid that the people would not obey the reform, they set up a three *zhang* long wood at the southern gate, claiming that if anybody could move it out of the northern gate, he would be rewarded fifty *taels* of gold; no one believed it. There was a man who tried to move the wood, and sure enough, Shang Yang rewarded him with the money, thereupon everybody believed. Shang Yang’s legislation was rigorous, the people did not dare to disobey.

Chapter 20
Remains of stone tablet still being read every day and every month, distinguished senior must still ascend.
(Translated by Foxs)

Madame Hong hooked the hilt of the dagger with her right foot, the dagger shot swiftly back toward her throat. "Careful!" Wei Xiaobao cried out in fear. Madame Hong shrank her body down, the dagger shot passed the top of her head toward the Cult Leader's chest.

The beautiful woman's eyes swept from west to east, the

smile did not vanish from her face. She slowly said, “The Black Dragon Gate *Zhangmenshi*[104], today the deadline has arrived, please hand over the sutra." Her voice was sharp, clear, and flirtatious; it was extremely pleasant to the ears. She held out her left hand with palm facing up.

Looking from far away, Wei Xiaobao saw that the palm looked like it was carved from a piece of white jade. Suddenly a thought welled up from the bottom of his heart, "It won't be too bad if this woman become my wife. If she is doing business at the Lovely Spring Courtyard, all Yangzhou's patrons will rush forth to squeeze through the Lovely Spring Courtyard's main gate."

An old man on the left side took two steps forward, he bowed and said, "Reporting to the Madame: News from Beijing says that we have located four sutras, and we are intensifying the effort to obtain them. Following Jiaozhu's treasured teaching, even if we have to lose our lives, we will get the books, to be presented to Jiaozhu and Madame." His voice trembled slightly, obviously he was completely terrified.

"What a pity, what a pity," Wei Xiaobao mused, "Turns out this beautiful woman is the Jiaozhu's wife, a fresh flower inserted on a cow's dung, a bright moonlight illuminating a latrine!"

The woman smiled slightly and said, "Jiaozhu has extended the deadline three times, Black Dragon Envoy, you have always pushed the deadline with all sorts of excuses three, four times. If you are unwilling to strive, aren't you being disloyal to Jiaozhu?"

The Black Dragon Envoy bowed even lower; he said, "Subordinate has received Jiaozhu and Madame's great kindness, even with torn body and crushed bones it will be difficult for me to repay. The fact is, this matter is extremely thorny, subordinate has dispatched six people into the Palace,

and had Deng Bingchun and Liu Yan, two people lost their lives for the Cult. I wish for Jiaozhu and Madame to graciously extend the deadline."

Wei Xiaobao mused, "Turns out that fat sow and the fake palace maid are your subordinates. I am afraid the old wh0re's rank is also lower than yours."

The woman raised her left hand to beckon Wei Xiaobao. She laughed and said, "*Xiao Didi* [little brother - term of endearment], come here."

Wei Xiaobao jumped in fright. "Me?" he said in a low voice.

"That's right," the woman replied, "I am calling you."

Wei Xiaobao took a quick glance toward Mr. Lu and Fat Toutuo on his side. Mr. Lu said, "Madame is calling you, go forward and salute her respectfully."

Wei Xiaobao said in his heart, "What will happen if I do not salute her respectfully?" But he stepped forward anyway, and then respectfully bowed to salute her, saying, "Jiaozhu and Madame will enjoy immortal good fortune forever, your long life will be the same as the heaven's."

Madame Hong laughed and said, "This child is clever. Who taught you to add the 'and Madame' three characters [he fu ren] after the word Jiaozhu?"

Wei Xiaobao did not know that the cult members of the Divine Dragon Cult had always said 'Jiaozhu will enjoy immortal good fortune forever, his long life will be the same as the heaven's'. After they entered the Cult, they would always automatically recite these words; nobody dared to add a character or subtract half a sentence. Seeing not only this Madame was very beautiful, she was extremely powerful as well, Wei Xiaobao thought that since to flatter he did not need any capital, he thoughtlessly added the 'and Madame' three characters. Listening to her question, he simply said, "Jiaozhu and Madame

are partners, only then will living a life as long as the heaven's be interesting. Otherwise, after a hundred or two hundred years, Madame returns to heaven, how could Jiaozhu not be extremely lonely?"

As soon as Madame Hong heard him, she laughed just like a flowering branch trembled randomly. Hong Jiaozhu could not restrain his smile either, with his hand twisting his long beard, he nodded his head and smiled.

When the cult members of the Divine Dragon Cult, from top to bottom, saw their Cult Leader, no one did not trembling in fear, who would dare to unguardedly speak nonsense like that? When they heard Wei Xiaobao earlier, they all broke in cold sweats on his behalf, but seeing Jiaozhu and Madame's warm expressions, they all felt relieved.

Madame Hong laughed and said, "Was it your own idea to add those three characters?"

"Exactly," Wei Xiaobao replied, "It was not a fake. The curvy characters on the stone tablet also mention Madame."

As soon as he said those words, Mr. Lu felt as if he had just fallen into an icehouse; he had spent countless suffering just to have Wei Xiaobao memorized the writings on the stone tablet, and now he suddenly had an unconventional idea to add Madame's name into it, how could he account for the unmatched number of characters? This urchin talked irresponsibly, inevitably he was messing up the inscribed text on the tablet. He realized that his work had already contained a lot of flaws, with this new development, wouldn't his plot fall through and stand exposed on the spot?

Hearing this, Madame Hong was also startled; she asked, "Did you say my name is also engraved on the stone tablet?"

"That's right!" Wei Xiaobao said. As soon as he blurted out these two words 'that's right', he immediately groaned inwardly,

"It's bad! If she wants me to recite the inscription, it won't have any reference to the Madame."

Luckily Madame Hong did not ask at all. "You are surnamed Wei, and you came from Beijing, is that right?" she asked.

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said the same words again.

"I heard from Fat Toutuo," Madame Hong said, "That in Beijing you met a fat lady by the name of Liu Yan, and she even taught you some martial art?"

Wei Xiaobao thought, "Everything I told Fat Toutuo, other than the sutra, he has reported to Jiaozhu and Madame, now I'd better stick to it to the end. In any event, that fat Liu Yan is dead, it is called 'the dead cannot testify'." Thereupon he said, "Exactly, this Auntie Liu is a good friend of my *Shushu* [younger paternal uncle]. Day or night, she often comes to my house."

With a soft chuckle Madame Hong asked, "What is she doing in your house?"

"To talk and joke with my *Shushu*, of course," Wei Xiaobao replied, "Sometimes they embrace and kiss each other, they thought I did not see them, but I secretly watched them." He knew that the more he was able to tell the story with living spirit and living image, mentioning various minute and complicated details, the more people would believe him.

Madame Hong laughed, "You, this child, is so sly. People kissing, you are peeping," she said. Turning to the Black Dragon Envoy she said, "Did you hear? Do you think this child is lying?"

Wei Xiaobao followed her gaze and saw the Black Dragon Envoy's countenance changed greatly, showing his fear had reached its extreme point, his body trembled, his knees bent, he kneeled on the floor and repeatedly knocked his head, while saying, "Subordinate ... subordinate oversees my people improperly, I deserve to die ten thousand deaths, I beg Jiaozhu and Madame to open ... open the net on one side [i.e. be

lenient], to let subordinate set up some meritorious deed to atone for my crime."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly surprised; he thought, "I was just saying that that fat pig and my *Shushu* kissed, what does it have to do with this old fellow? Why does he have to be frightened like this?"

Madame Hong smiled and said, "Set up some meritorious deed to atone for your crime? What meritorious deed do you have? I always thought that the people you sent were loyal and devoted as they handled matters on behalf of Jiaozhu. Who would have thought that in Beijing they are actually doing these loose and shady businesses?"

The Black Dragon Envoy kowtowed again and again, until his forehead was bleeding profusely. Wei Xiaobao could not bear to see him, he wanted to say something good on his behalf, but in that moment he could not find anything to say.

The Black Dragon Envoy crawled on his knees forward, he called out, "Jiaozhu, I have followed you, the Senior, from the cradle to the grave; although I do not have any meritorious service, I have worked hard for you."

With a cold laugh Madame Hong said, "What's the use of bringing up former matters? You are already old, how many more years can you give in service to Jiaozhu? Wouldn't it be merrier if you just quit your Black Dragon Envoy position earlier?"

The Black Dragon Envoy raised his head to look at Hong Jiaozhu, with a sorrowful voice he said, "Jiaozhu, you really don't have the least bit of old affection toward your old troop, your old *Xiongdi*?"

Hong Jiaozhu's face stayed wooden as he indifferently said, "There are too many old rotten and muddled people in our Cult, we ought to tidy up well." His voice was deep and low, and

somewhat slurred. Ever since he saw him, this was the first time Wei Xiaobao had ever heard him speaking.

Suddenly several hundred teenage boys and girls shouted loudly, “With Jiaozhu’s treasured teaching always in our hearts, we can set up meritorious deed and subdue the enemy, nothing is unachievable!”

The Black Dragon Envoy sighed. Still trembling, he stood up and said, "Breathing out stale air and breathing in fresh, we, the old men, deserve to die anyway." Turning around, he said, "Bring it here!" From the hall's door, four teenagers in black clothes went forward in quick steps, each one carried a wooden tray, on each tray there was a round brass lid. When they arrived in front of the Black Dragon Envoy, they set the wooden trays on the floor, and then quickly turned around and withdrew. As if by prior agreement, everybody in the hall drew back several steps.

The Black Dragon Envoy muttered, “With Jiaozhu’s treasured teaching always in our hearts, we can set up meritorious deed and subdue the enemy, nothing is unachievable ... hey hey, there is one thing that is unachievable, that is the subordinate is not loyal and devoted at all.” Reaching out, he grabbed the knob on the top of the brass lid and lifted it up. The object on the tray suddenly flew up, followed by a flash of white light, a flying dagger flew in at an angle, cutting the object into two sections, which then fell back onto the tray, wiggling and squirming. It was a gorgeous-looking multi-colored small snake.

Wei Xiaobao cried out in alarm. The people in the hall also cried out, "Who was it?" "Who's rebelling against our leader?" "Catch him!" "Who's the traitor who has the audacity to disobey Jiaozhu?"

Madame Hong suddenly stood up, made a circle with both hands, followed by waving down three times. A series of 'Shua, shua, shua!' was heard, the swords had left their scabbards,

several hundred teenage boys and girls rushed forward to surround about fifty, sixty older members of the Cult. These several hundred teenagers, the ones wearing black were grouped together, the ones wearing white were grouped together, they did not mingled at all, everyone occupied his/her respective position, some were in group of six or seven, some were in group of eight or nine, each group surrounded one person in the middle. Their long swords were aimed at vital points, the several dozen older people were immediately put under their control. Fat Toutuo and Mr. Lu were also facing seven, eight swords each.

A fifty-something old Taoist priest with black beard laughed aloud and said, "Madame, you trained this formation, how many months have you spent? If you want to deal with old *Xiongdi*, actually you don't need to spend such energy."

Those who surrounded him were eight teenage girls wearing red clothes. Two girls raised their swords toward the pit of his stomach. "Don't be rude toward Jiaozhu and Madame," they shouted.

The Taoist priest laughed and said, "Madame, it was me, Priest Wugen [lit. without root], who killed that five-colored divine dragon. You want to punish, feel free to make your move, why implicate other people?"

Madame Hong sat back down on her chair; she smiled and said, "You admit it yourself, nothing could be better than that. *Daozhang* [(Taoist) Priest], haven't Jiaozhu treated you well? He entrusted you the Scarlet Dragon Gate *Zhangmenshi* position, which is only one rank lower than the Jiaozhu himself, above ten thousand people in seniority; why do you want to rebel?"

Priest Wugen said, "Subordinate is not rebelling. Black Dragon Envoy Zhang Danyue has rendered great service to our Cult, just because there are some people among his subordinates who did not handle their affairs favorably, Madame wanted to

take his life. Subordinate boldly asks Jiaozhu and Madame to show mercy."

Madame Hong laughed and said, "And if I do not comply?"

Priest Wugen said, "Although Shen Long Jiao was founded by Jiaozhu, several tens of thousands *xiongdi* have gone through water and tread on fire together with him, everybody has his contribution. In those days, there were a total of one thousand twenty three old *xiongdi*, today some have lost their lives in the hands of the enemy, some were put to death by Jiaozhu, and those that remain are less than a hundred people. Subordinate asks Jiaozhu to show mercy by sparing the lives of ours, several dozen old *xiongdi*, simply kick us all out of the Cult. If Jiaozhu and Madame find us, these old people, repulsive, and want to promote new people, then just send us, the old people, out of here."

With a cold laugh Madame Hong said, "Since Shen Long Jiao was founded, I have never heard anybody leaving the Cult alive. By saying that, Priest Wugen is imagining the wildest thing."

"In that case," Priest Wugen said, "Madame does not agree?"

"Excuse me," Madame Hong said, "But our Cult does not have such rule."

Priest Wugen laughed aloud and said, "Turns out Jiaozhu and Madame have determined to put us all to death."

Madame Hong smiled, "That's not necessarily so," she said, "Old people who are loyal to Jiaozhu, naturally Jiaozhu still considers them good *xiongdi*, absolutely no discrimination here. We do not distinguish juniors from seniors, all we ask is whether they are loyal and devoted to Jiaozhu or not. Whoever is loyal to Jiaozhu, raise your hand."

Several hundred teenage boys and girls all raised their left hands, the senior members of the Cult who were being

surrounded also raised their hands, even Priest Wugen also raised his left hand. Everybody chorused, "To be loyal to Jiaozhu, absolutely no double-mind!"

Seeing everybody was raising his hand, Wei Xiaobao also raised his hand. Madame Hong nodded and said, "That's very good, turns out everybody is loyal to Jiaozhu, including this newly arrived *Xiao Didi*, although he is not a member of our Cult, unexpectedly he is also loyal to Jiaozhu."

In his heart Wei Xiaobao said, "I am loyal to the turtle son of a b1tch."

Madame Hong said, "Everybody is loyal, then we do not have a single rebellious traitor in here. I'm afraid there is something fishy here, I'll have to investigate carefully. I must offend all old *xiongdi* for the time being. Tie them up."

"Yes!" several hundred teenage boys and girls replied together.

"Hold on!" a tall and sturdy man called out.

Madame Hong said, "White Dragon Envoy, what respected opinion do you have?"

"Respected opinion, that I do not have," the man replied, "Subordinate only feel it's not fair."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," Madame Hong clicked her tongue, "You are criticizing me as handling this matter unfairly."

"Subordinate does not dare," the man said, "Subordinate has been following Jiaozhu for twenty years, and has marched forward courageously in everything. When I was risking my life for our Cult, these little babies have not even born yet. Why is it that they are loyal to Jiaozhu, but we, the old *xiongdi*, are not loyal?"

Madame Hong chuckled and said, "By saying that, White Dragon Envoy is showing off your own merit. Aren't you saying

that if there was no White Dragon Envoy Zhong Zhiling, Shen Long Jiao will not exist today?"

The tall and sturdy man, Zhong Zhiling said, "The founding of Shen Long Jiao is Jiaozhu, one man's merit, everybody else was simply following him, the Senior, striking the world, there is no merit worthy to be mentioned, but ..."

"But what?" Madame Hong asked.

Zhong Zhiling said, "But we do not have any merit, these teenage babies do not have merit even more."

"I am only twenty something years old," Madame Hong said, "So I do not have any merit either?"

Zhong Zhiling hesitated for half a day. "That's right," he finally said, "Madame does not have any merit either. The great undertaking of founding our Cult is Jiaozhu, the Senior, one man's merit."

Madame Hong slowly said, "Since nobody has any merit, killing you will not be considered an injustice, will it?" While saying this, her eyes flickered with a murderous spirit, but her expression was still extremely charming.

Zhong Zhiling roared angrily, "Naturally killing the one surnamed Zhong alone is not a big deal. I am just afraid that by murdering a loyal and good person, by putting to death a minister who has given outstanding service, the foundation of Shen Long Jiao will be destroyed in the hands of Madame, one person."

"Very good, very good," Madame Hong said, "Ay, I am very tired." These last few words were spoken languidly, who would have thought that it was unexpectedly a secret signal to kill? As soon as the seven teenagers wearing white clothes surrounding Zhong Zhiling heard it, they thrust their swords forward, simultaneously entered Zhong Zhiling's body.

When the seven swords were drawn, from Zhong Zhiling body spurted seven streams of blood, splashing the seven teenagers' white clothes that their clothes were soaked with blood. Zhong Zhiling called out, "Jiaozhu, you ... have the heart to do this! You ... " He fell down and died. The seven teenagers withdrew toward the corridor, their movement was very orderly.

All the older members of the Cult knew that the White Dragon Envoy Zhong Zhiling's martial art skill was very high, but the seven swords moved together, unexpectedly he did not have the slightest bit of power to resist, showing that in order for these seven teenagers to be able to thrust their swords together in the hall today, they must have been under the Cult Leader's direction beforehand, also they must have practiced countless time, so that they were very familiar with the move and were able to execute it without a flaw. Nobody did not have a trembling heart.

After yawning, Madame Hong lightly pressed her left hand on her cherry-red lips; she appears so delicate and extremely calm. Hong Jiaozhu still maintained his wooden expression, as if he did not see the killing of Zhong Zhiling just now. Madame Hong softly said, "Blue Dragon Envoy, Yellow Dragon Envoy, you two gentlemen, do you feel that the White Dragon Envoy was scheming a rebellion, was guilty and deserve to be punished?"

An old man with slit eyes and sharp face bowed and said, "Zhong Zhiling rebelled against Jiaozhu and Madame, he had thought this through deliberately and methodically for quite a long time, subordinate utterly detest him, and have lodged an accusation several times to Madame, but Madame always said that looking at the old *xiongdi*'s face, let him had the opportunity to repent. Jiaozhu and Madame are magnanimous, hoping for him to reform and start afresh, who would have thought that this man was incomparably malicious. His guilt was definitely unpardonable. By letting him to have a quick death

like this, it was actually too easy for him. All the brethrens of the Cult, nobody is not grateful for Jiaozhu and Madame's benevolence."

In his heart Wei Xiaobao said, "He is flattering the big king."

Madame Hong smiled slightly and said, "Yellow Dragon Envoy understood the cardinal principle. Blue Dragon Envoy, what do you think?"

A tall and thin man in his fifties glowered at the eight teenagers wearing blue clothes around him. "Get lost!" he growled, "If Jiaozhu wants to kill me, do you think I cannot do it myself?"

Eight teenagers pushed their swords slightly forward, until the tip of the swords touched his clothes. The man let out several 'hey, hey' cold laugh, he slowly raised his hands to grab the chest of his own clothes; he said, "Jiaozhu, Madame, in the past, when subordinate, along with Scarlet, White, Black and Yellow, four Gates' *Zhangmenshi* sworn brotherhood, we determined to work ourselves to death for Shen Long Jiao, we did not expect there would be a day like today. Madame wanted to put anybody to death, it's not strange at all. What's strange to me is that because the Yellow Dragon Envoy Yin *Dage* is greedy for life, afraid of death, unexpectedly he uttered such a sordid and contemptible talk, slandering his own good *xiongdi* ..."

Suddenly there was a 'rip' noise as the man threw both hands outward, pulling his own long gown into two halves. With a shake of his arms, the two pieces of gowns coiled horizontally out, sweeping away the eight teenagers' swords. Blue light flashed, a pair of daggers about a *chi* and a half long appeared in his hands. With a series of 'Swish, swish!' sound, the pit of the eight teenagers' stomachs were hit by the dagger; they all fell to the ground, spurting blood from their wounds. Eight dead bodies fell around him, unexpectedly they form a very neat

circle. His movement was very fast, just like a thunderbolt before it even reaches the ears. Madame Hong was startled; she clapped her hands repeatedly. More than twenty teenagers in blue clothes rushed toward the Blue Dragon Envoy, and once again he was surrounded.

The Blue Dragon Envoy laughed aloud, and then in a loud and clear voice he said, "Madame, these babies that you trained are completely useless. If Jiaozhu wants to rely on these kids to establish great merits by subduing the enemy, won't it be too inconvenient?"

When the seven teenagers assassinate Zhong Zhiling, Hong Jiaozhu appeared to turn a blind eye, now that the Blue Dragon Envoy killed eight teenagers, he appeared as unconcerned; sitting quietly in his chair, all along he did not pay any attention. Madame Hong cast a quick glance toward her husband, as if she was somewhat ashamed. Smiling sweetly, she sat down and said with a laugh, "Blue Dragon Envoy, your swordsmanship is very good, today ..."

Suddenly there was a series of 'crash, bang!' noise all around the hall as the swords in the several hundred teenage boys and girls all fell to the floor. As they were still in shock, they saw one by one the teenagers fell on their knees to the ground. Instantly everybody also felt dizzy and their eyes dimmed, and were unable to stand. Those with weaker inner power fell down first, and then the rest of them swayed and fell down one after another. In a short moment the hall was strewn with lying bodies.

Madame Hong cried out in alarm, "What ... what happened?" Her body felt weak, she slipped down from the bamboo chair.

The Blue Dragon Envoy was actually standing upright and unafraid, with a malicious laugh he said, "Jiaozhu, when you massacred our *xiongdi*, have you ever thought that a day like today will arrive?" He struck his pair of daggers against each

other, creating a metallic clang. Stepping over the bodies lying on the ground, he walked toward Hong Jiaozhu.

"Humph!" Hong Jiaozhu snorted, "Maybe not!" Reaching out to grab the armrest of the bamboo chair, 'Crack!' he broke the armrest.

The Blue Dragon Envoy's countenance changed immediately. Withdrawing two steps, he said, "Jiaozhu, such a big cult like Shen Long Jiao is torn to pieces. Who planted the embryo of this calamity, you, Senior, ought to understand by now?"

"Mmm," Hong Jiaozhu mumbled; suddenly he slipped down from the chair and sat on the floor. The Blue Dragon Envoy was greatly delighted, he rushed forward. Suddenly he cried out, an object, carrying a strong gust of wind, was flying toward his chest. The Blue Dragon Envoy forcefully raised the dagger in his right hand to chop, the object broke into two pieces. Turned out it was the armrest from Hong Jiaozhu's bamboo chair. The force behind this throw was not a small matter at all, as the bamboo piece was cut, the front section did not fall. 'Stab!' it penetrated the Blue Dragon Envoy's chest, breaking five or six of his ribs, and pierced his lung.

The Blue Dragon Envoy screamed, but suddenly he stopped; the *chi* in his lung could not flow up, instantly he was muted. He swayed twice, the pair of daggers in his hands fell down, separately landed on the bodies of two teenage boys. These two teenagers' bodies were numb, they could not move, but actually their minds were still clear, and they could still talk. As the daggers pierced their bodies, they cried out in pain.

Seeing their Jiaozhu displaying his divine prowess by knocking down the Blue Dragon Envoy, several hundred teenage boys and girls cheered together. They saw their Jiaozhu propped himself up with his right hand, struggling to stand up, but before he could straighten up his right leg, his knees turned soft that he fell down again and rolled away several times.

Indeed he had fallen into an extremely difficult situation. This way, everybody knew that Jiaozhu was in the same boat as them, he was also being poisoned that his muscle went soft and his flesh paralyzed.

Normally, the Cult Leader was an extremely dignified person, even in front of the Cult members very seldom did he ever speak more than a sentence, or laugh more than once. This time unexpectedly he had fallen and suffered disgrace, losing the strength of his entire body.

Several hundred people in the hall were lying on the floor, but there was one person who was still standing. This person was actually very short, but standing among several hundred people lying on the floor, inevitably he looked like a crane in a flock of chicken. This person was none other than Wei Xiaobao. His nose smelled a burst of faint fragrance, but he felt very calm and relaxed, his entire body felt comfortably warm, a strange good feeling that he could not explain.

Seeing everybody had fallen to the ground without knowing the reason, he was completely baffled. After staring blankly for quite a while, he reached down to pull Fat Toutuo up and asked, "Fat Revered Monk, what happened to everybody?"

Fat Toutuo was surprised, "You ... you are not poisoned?" he asked.

"Poisoned?" Wei Xiaobao was equally surprised, "I ... I don't know." He struggled hard to help Fat Toutuo up, but Fat Toutuo did not have any strength left on his legs, he fell back sitting down on the floor.

Mr. Lu suddenly asked, "Xu *Dage*, you ... what kind of poison did you use?"

The Blue Dragon Envoy's body swayed as if he was drunk; supporting himself on a pillar, he coughed incessantly and said, "What a pity, what ... what a pity I failed within sight of

success. I ... I am unfit for anything."

"Is it 'seven-insect tendon softening powder'?" Mr. Lu asked, "Is it 'thousand-*li* ecstasy fragrance'? Or is it 'Trans ... transforming blood ... decaying bone dust'?" Successively he mentioned the names of three most debilitating poison. When mentioning the name 'transforming blood decaying bone dust', his voice trembled, as if he was extremely terrified.

The Blue Dragon Envoy's right lung was heavily injured; his coughing was very severe, he was unable to answer. Mr. Lu asked, "How come Wei *Gongzi* is not poisoned? Ah! I know!" He suddenly remembered something. These two words 'I know' were shouted really loud. He said, "You have applied the 'hundred flowers snake belly's ointment' on your daggers. Brilliant scheme, brilliant scheme. Wei *Gongzi*, could you please sniff the Blue Dragon Envoy's pair of daggers? See if you smell flower's fragrance on the blades."

Wei Xiaobao thought, "The blades are poisonous, I am not going to smell them." He said, "I can smell strong fragrance from here."

Mr. Lu looked delighted; "That's right!" he said, "When this 'hundred flowers snake belly's ointment' came in contact with blood, it will produce a strong fragrance. Actually, it was a certain sect's secret method to refine spices, when ordinary people smell it, they will feel their spirits invigorated, but ... but we live on this Spirit Snake Island, everybody is used to take the 'realgar medicated wine' to dispel the poisonous snakes. As soon as this fragrance came in contact with the 'realgar medicated wine', it will make our muscles and bones weak for twelve *shichen* [24 hours]. Xu *Dage*, what a brilliant scheme. This 'hundred flowers snake belly's ointment' is actually forbidden on the island, turns out you have prepared this in secret for a long time. You must have stopped drinking the 'realgar medicated wine' three, four months ago."

The Blue Dragon Envoy sat down, he happened to sat on two teenagers' bodies. Shaking his head, he said, "Man proposes but God disposes, in the end I still fell under Hong Antong's evil scheme."

Several teenage boys shouted, "Audacious mad disciple, you dare to randomly call Jiaozhu's holy name."

The Blue Dragon Envoy stood up slowly. Picking up a long sword, he walked over toward Hong Jiaozhu step by step. "Why can't I say the name Hong Antong?" he said, "Cough, cough ... after I kill this evil thief ... cough, cough ... does it matter if I call his name or not?"

Several hundred teenage boys and girls called out in alarm. After a while, the Yellow Dragon Envoy's old voice was heard, "Xu *Xiongdi*, after you kill Hong Antong, everybody will support you as the new Shen Long Jiao's Jiaozhu. Everybody recite quickly: We will obey Xu Jiaozhu's command, absolutely no double-mind!"

The hall was silent for a moment, and then several dozen people recited, "We will obey Xu Jiaozhu's command, absolutely no double-mind." Some were confident, some appeared rather hesitant, it sounded rather irregular.

The Blue Dragon Envoy took two steps forward, coughed once, and swayed several times. His injury was very heavy, but struggled with everything he had, because no matter what, he must kill Hong Jiaozhu first.

Suddenly Madame Hong giggled and said, “Blue Dragon Envoy, you don’t have any strength left, your thighs does not have the least bit of strength, the blood bubbled up in the pit of your stomach, very soon you will lose everything. You are finished. Why don’t you sit down? You are very tired. That’s right, sit down and rest for a while. Put down your sword. In a moment you may sit by my side, let me cure your injury. That’s

right, sit down, put down your sword.” The more she spoke, her voice grew gentler and more flirtatious.

The Blue Dragon Envoy took several more steps, in the end he sat down slowly. ‘Clang!’ the sword in his hand fell down to the floor.

Seeing the Blue Dragon Envoy did not have any strength to stand up again, the Yellow Dragon Envoy shouted, “Xu Xueting, you, this traitor, are indulging yourself in wishful thinking, damn it, you want to be the Jiaozhu, just scatter your own urine to yourself, this revolting behavior cannot be tolerated.”

The Scarlet Dragon Envoy Priest Wugen shouted, “Yin Jin, you are such a despicable, shameless lowly person, you see the wind and set the helm, rocking to the east and sway to the west. As soon as the ol’ Taoist can move my hands and feet, the first thing I’ll do will be to slaughter you.”

The Yellow Dragon Envoy Yin Jin said, “Why are you vicious? I … I …” he wanted to talk back, but saw that swaying and rocking, the Blue Dragon Envoy struggled hard to stand up.

Once again the battle’s outcome was undecided[105], thereupon he shut his mouth.

In the meantime, the eyes of several hundred people in the hall were all fixed on Xu Xueting. In a soft voice Madame Hong said, “Xu *Dage*, you are very tired, why don’t you sit down? Just look at me, I’ll sing a little song for you. Just take a good rest, later on I will sing a little song for you every day. Tell me if I look beautiful.”

“Oh, oh,” Xu Xueting repeatedly mumbled, he said, “You … you are very beautiful, but I … I do not dare to look at you too much …” While saying that, he sat down again, and this time he could not stand back up; however, his mind was still as bright as snow, he realized that as long as he could not stand up, he would not be able to kill Jiaozhu. Among these several hundred

people, the Cult Leader's skill was the most profound, surely he would be the first to have the poison in his system driven out, and then every one of the older brethrens would not be fortunate to escape his evil scheme. Thereupon he said, "Mister … Mister Lu, I can't move, you must think … think … cough, cough … think of a way."

"Wei *Gongzi*," Mr. Lu said, "This Jiaozhu is extremely vicious, when the poison in his body is neutralized, he will kill everybody, even you will not escape. Quickly kill Jiaozhu and Madame."

Even if he did not say those words, Wei Xiaobao had already understood. Picking up a sword, he slowly walked toward the Cult Leader.

Mr. Lu added, "This Madame Hong is a fox-spirit, she will completely deceive people, you must not look at her face, don't look at her eyes."

"Yes!" Wei Xiaobao replied. With raised sword he took several steps forward.

In a soft voice Madame Hong said, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, tell me, do you think I am beautiful?" Her voice was brimming with overwhelming emotion that can erode the bones. Wei Xiaobao's heart was moved; he turned his head to look at her.

Fat Toutuo shouted loudly, "Wicked demon; don't look at her!" Wei Xiaobao shivered and closed his eyes tight.

With a tender laugh Madame Hong said, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, look at me, turn your eyes on me, open your eyes, look, you can see your reflection in my eyes!"

As soon as Wei Xiaobao opened his eyes, he saw Madame Hong's graceful eyes and smiling expression; he could not stop his heart from being shaken. Immediately he raised the sword in front of his chest and walked toward Hong Jiaozhu, thinking, "You are such a beautiful woman, I really cannot kill you, but I

simply must kill your husband.”

Suddenly from his left came a sharp and clear voice calling out, “Wei *Dage*! Don’t kill him!”

The voice sounded very familiar. Wei Xiaobao’s heart was shaken. He turned toward the voice and saw a young girl wearing red clothes lying on the ground, her eyebrows were elegant her eyes were gorgeous, she was none other than Xiao Junzhu Mu Jianping. Wei Xiaobao was flabbergasted; not in a million years would he expect to see her in this place. As for why she was wearing the Scarlet Dragon Gate’s red uniform, he did not feel surprised at all. Busily he helped her up and asked, “How can you be here?”

Mu Jianping did not answer his question, she only said, “By all means, you must not kill Jiaozhu.”

“Have you joined Shen Long Jiao?” Wei Xiaobao asked in surprise, “How … how come?”

Mu Jianping’s entire body was so soft as if she did not have any bones; leaning against his shoulder, she put her small mouth close to his ear and said in a low voice, “If you kill Jiaozhu and Madame, I will not live. Those old men hate us to the death, they will definitely kill us all the young people.”

“I am going to ask them not to harm you,” Wei Xiaobao said, “I think they will consent.”

“No, no!” Mu Jianping anxiously said, “Jiaozhu has given us poison, other people cannot neutralize it.”

Meeting with her again after a long separation, Wei Xiaobao was actually very happy, much less she was leaning in his bosom, he could smell her soft fragrance, and hear her tender voice in his ear. He found it very difficult to resist her request, plus he thought that the Cult Leader had forced her to take the poison and nobody else could save her; therefore, if he killed the Cult Leader, he would be killing this beautiful young woman

in his bosom, which he must never do. It was a very difficult decision to take. He said in a low voice, “If I don’t kill Jiaozhu, after the poison in Jiaozhu’s body is neutralized, he will definitely kill me.” He was holding Mu Jianping in tight embrace, he said those words in her ear.

Mu Jianping said, “If you saved Jiaozhu and Madame, how could they kill you?”

Wei Xiaobao thought that she was right, Madame Hong was such a thousand-beauty a hundred-charming woman, no matter what she must not be killed. Before his eyes was an opportunity to set up a great merit, it’s just that inevitably Fat Toutuo, Mr. Lu, Priest Wugen and the others would be killed by the Cult Leader. Priest Wugen was an extremely heroic man, it would be a pity to have him killed. It would be best if he did not kill Jiaozhu and Madame, while saving Fat Toutuo and the others’ lives at the same time. Thereupon he said, “Exactly! Good wife, even if Jiaozhu wanted to kill me, I will definitely save your life.” While saying that, he landed a kiss on her left cheek.

Mu Jianping was extremely bashful, her face blushed, but her eyes revealed a happy expression as she said in a low voice, “If you set up a great merit, plus you are a young child, how can Jiaozhu kill you?”

Wei Xiaobao lay Mu Jianping back on the floor; he turned his head and said, “Mr. Lu, Jiaozhu must not be killed, and so is Madame. The inscription on the stone tablet says that Jiaozhu and Madame will enjoy immortal good fortune forever, their long lives will be the same as the heaven’s; how can I dare to harm their lives? The two Seniors’ magical power is extensive, even if I want to harm them, I cannot harm them to their death.”

Mr. Lu was greatly anxious; “The inscription is a fake,” he called out, “How can you even take it into consideration? Don’t indulge in flights of fancy, quickly kill those two people,

otherwise, everybody will die without a burial site."

Wei Xiaobao repeatedly shook his head. "Mr. Lu," he said, "You must not say such a treason talk. Do you have the antidote? We must neutralize the poison in Jiaozhu and Madame's bodies."

In a soft voice Madame Hong said, "That's right, *Xiao Xiongdi*, you indeed have excellent knowledge and experience. The Heaven sent such a young hero like you to descend to the world, actually to assist Jiaozhu. For Shen Long Jiao to have such a young hero like you, it is indeed everyone's good fortune."

She appeared to say those words from the bottom of her heart, it was brimming with amazement and high praise. When Wei Xiaobao heard it, he felt an unspeakable joy and comfort in his heart. He laughed and said, "Madame, I don't belong to Shen Long Jiao."

Madame Hong laughed. "Nothing could be easier than that," she said, "You can join the Cult right now, I can be your sponsor [orig. person who receive and instruct]. Jiaozhu, this *Xiao Xiongdi* has set up such a great merit for our Cult, which official position should we assign to him?"

The Cult Leader said, "The White Dragon Gate's *Zhangmenshi* Zhong Zhiling has been executed for apostasy, we can promote this young man as the White Dragon Envoy."

"That's great!" Madame Hong said with a laugh, "*Xiao Xiongdi*, our Cult is headed by Jiaozhu, under him are Blue, Yellow, Scarlet, White and Black, five dragon envoys. To have someone like you, who as soon as you join the Cult immediately becomes one of the five dragon envoys, it is indeed unprecedented, indicating that that Jiaozhu has a very high opinion of you. *Xiao Xiongdi*, you are surnamed Wei, that much we know. But what is your great name?"

"My name is Wei Xiaobao," Wei Xiaobao replied, "In Jianghu,

people call me the Little White Dragon." He recalled Mao Shiba had fabricated a nickname for him with the thought that if he did not have any nickname, it would not be impressive enough. Who could have thought that the nickname agreed with what had happened today as if by prior consultation?

"You see, you see!" Madame Hong happily said, "This is the Heaven's plan, otherwise, how can there be such coincidence? Jiaozhu's golden mouth has spoken, definitely he won't renege."

Mr. Lu was greatly anxious, "Wei *Gongzi*," he said, "Don't fall into their trick. Even if you become the White Dragon Envoy, if they don't like you and want to kill you, won't it be as easy as turning their hand over? The White Dragon Envoy Zhong Zhiling was the example right in front of our eyes. Quickly kill Jiaozhu and Madame, everybody will support you as the new Jiaozhu of Shen Long Jiao."

As soon as he said that, everybody was startled. Fat Toutuo, Xu Xueting, Priest Wugen and the others all felt that this idea was extremely unthinkable. But then they had a second thought: if they did not support him to be the new Cult Leader, currently there was no position in the Cult higher than the White Dragon Envoy position. The situation before their eyes was very urgent, the lives of everybody present were hanging on his hand. Only by doing this they would be able to tempt him to kill Jiaozhu and Madame. As soon as the crisis was over, even if they really promote him to become the Cult Leader, he would not escape from everybody's grasp. Thereupon everybody chorused, "Right, right, we will support Wei *Gongzi* as the Shen Long Jiao's Jiaozhu; everybody will be loyal and devoted to you."

Wei Xiaobao's heart was moved, he cast a sidelong glance toward Madame Hong. She was half sitting half lying on the bamboo chair, as if her entire body was devoid of any bones.

Her chest was heaving up and down slightly, her cheeks blushed, her eyes glistened. He mused, "There's nothing fun being the Jiaozhu, but this Madame Jiaozhu is extremely pretty. If I become the Jiaozhu, will you or won't you still become the Madame Jiaozhu?"

But this thought only flashed through in his mind, immediately he cleared his head, "Each of these people has superior martial art skill, as soon as the poison in their bodies is neutralized, how can I deal with them? It will be 'pulling the plank after crossing the bridge'." As for the matter of 'pulling the plank after crossing the bridge', he had had personal experience with the Tian Di Hui's Green Wood Hall. But Tian Di Hui brethrens were heroes and warrior, after crossing the bridge, they did not pull the plank in a hurry. These Shen Long Jiao fellows, on the other hand, how could they not pull the plank in a hurry? Worse yet, how could they not do it in great delight? Although Madame Jiaozhu was pretty, when all is said and done, his own life was prettier.

Thereupon he stuck out his tongue and said with a laugh, "I don't want to be the Jiaozhu, by saying that, you are not bringing good fortune to me. Besides, it is treason and heresy. How about this: Jiaozhu, Madame, and everybody here better be reconciled. I want both sides to disregard what had happened today. Mr. Lu, Blue Dragon Envoy and the others have offended Jiaozhu, I am asking Jiaozhu to be magnanimous and disregard their crime. Mr. Lu, take the antidote out, after everybody is cured, won't it be good that we are all friendly toward each other?"

Without waiting for Mr. Lu to open his mouth, Hong Jiaozhu immediately said, "Very well, let's do it. The White Dragon Envoy is urging us to work together, to let bygones be bygones; I accept the auspicious loyal advice. The matter of everybody rebelled against the authority today, I am willing to forgive and

will no longer look into it."

Wei Xiaobao happily said, "Blue Dragon Envoy, Jiaozhu has agreed, don't you agree that this is wonderful?"

Realizing that Wei Xiaobao was unwilling to kill the Cult Leader no matter what, Mr. Lu heaved a deep sigh and said, "If that's the case, Jiaozhu, Madame, would you two please make an oath."

Madame Hong said, "I, Su Quan, will not look into today's matter. If I go against this oath, let me fall into the Dragon Pool, and be devoured by ten thousand snakes."

In a low and deep voice Hong Jiaozhu said, "If in the future I, Shen Long Jiao Jiaozhu Hong Antong, ever settle the account with old *xiongdi* over what had happened today, let the Ol' Hong fall into the Dragon Pool and be devoured by ten thousand snakes, so that even my bones will not survive."

'Fall into the Dragon Pool and be devoured by ten thousand snakes' was Shen Long Jiao's heaviest punishment. Jiaozhu and Madame swore this heavy oath, although they were under pressure, they simply could not retract what they had said.

"Blue Dragon Envoy, what do you think?" Mr. Lu asked.

Xu Xueting was at his last gasp, he said, "I … I won't live anyway."

"Priest Wugen, what do you think?" Mr. Lu asked again.

In a loud voice Priest Wugen said, "Let it be so. Hong Jiaozhu was originally our old *xiongdi*, his literary and martial art skills are ten times better than everybody else. We all originally supported him without half-heartedness. Ever since he took this Madame as his wife, his character underwent huge changes; he only loved to promote young boys and girls and had us, the old *xiongdi* massacred one by one. The Blue Dragon Envoy was the first to rise in revolt, but he was only striving to survive,

without any other motive. Since Jiaozhu and Madame have sworn an oath publicly not to look into today's matter, no longer recklessly murder old *xiongdi*, why would we want to rebel against him? Besides, Shen Long Jiao cannot exist without this Jiaozhu."

A group of teenage boys and girls shouted loudly, "Jiaozhu will enjoy immortal good fortune forever, his long life will be the same as the heaven's."

"Wei *Gongzi*," Mr. Lu said, "You have not taken 'realgar medicated wine', therefore, you were not poisoned by … and thus have set up the great merit of today. It was the mystery of the underworld, the Will of Heaven. To neutralize the poison, it is very easy. Go outside and scoop up some cold water, bring it here and have everybody here drink some."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "Turns out this poison is very easy to neutralize." He went out the hall, but could not find any cold water. Circling around the hall, he saw a row of twenty stone jars, seven of them were brimming with clear water. Actually, the water was to guard against the bamboo hall catching fire. Immediately he filled a bucket full with water and returned to the main hall. He scooped some water and had the Cult Leader drink it first. Next he gave Madame Hong some water. The third scoop was for Priest Wugen; he said, "*Daozhang* [priest], you are a hero and a warrior." The fourth, the fifth were for Fat Toutuo and Mr. Lu. The sixth was for Mu Jianping.

After drinking the water, they all threw up, and then slowly regained the strength of their hands and feet. After Wei Xiaobao fed several more people, Mr. Lu was already able to stand up and walk, immediately he attended the Blue Dragon Envoy Xu Xueting's injury, trying to stop his bleeding. Fat Toutuo and the others also took cold water to help the brethrens closest to them. Very soon Mu Jianping was able to

help several teenage girls wearing red clothes.

The hall reeked with vomit, the stench was unbearable.

Madame Hong said, “Everybody, go back and rest, we will assemble again tomorrow.”

Hong Jiaozhu said, “I have decided to let bygones be bygones, all *xiongdi* are partners, you cannot, because of what happened today, strife against each other to carry out a vendetta against our brother. Those who disobey will be severely punished. The youngster of Five Dragon Gates must not be disrespectful against the *Zhangmenshi*. In the same way, the *Zhangmenshi* must not find any excuse to punish the young members of our Gates.”

Everyone received the order with one voice, but they were still suspicious and jealous, after all, it was very difficult to drive anxiety away.

“White Dragon Envoy,” Madame Hong said in a soft voice, “Come with me.”

Wei Xiaobao still did not know that she was calling him, only after seeing her beckoning to him did he realize that he had become the Divine Dragon Cult's White Dragon Envoy; thereupon he followed her.

The Cult Leader and Madame walked side-by-side out of the main hall. Everybody who could move bowed to salute, while shouting with a loud voice, “Jiaozhu will enjoy immortal good fortune forever, his long life will be the same as the heaven's!”

Following a path laid with dark green flagstones the Cult Leader and Madame left the building and walk to the left. After passing through a sizeable bamboo groove, they arrived at an elevated level ground, where several large bamboo structures were built. A dozen or so teenage boys and girls wearing five different color clothes were on guard duty around the buildings with unsheathed swords in their hands. Seeing the Cult Leader,

they all bowed to salute. Madame Hong led Wei Xiaobao into a bamboo building and said to a youngster wearing white clothes, "This is Wei *Gongzi*, the newly-appointed *Zhangmenshi* of your White Dragon Gate. Take him to the eastern wing to rest, all of you must serve him well." Finished speaking, she flashed a smile toward Wei Xiaobao and entered the inner hall.

Several teenagers in white clothes presented themselves to Wei Xiaobao and said, "Young subordinates pay their respect to the Envoy."

In the Palace, Wei Xiaobao was accustomed to be a chief of the court eunuchs; in Tian Di Hui, he was accustomed to be a *Xiangzhu*, he did not care in the least bit that people were treating him deferentially; he simply nodded. Several teenagers in white clothes took him to the eastern wing and offered to serve him tea. Although it was only a wing, the room was very spacious; the furnishings were elegant and pure, with gold and jade antiques spread all over the table. Several rolls of calligraphy and paintings were hung on the wall, the bedding on the bed was magnificent, unexpectedly it had a little bit of the Imperial Palace's style.

Those several teenagers in white clothes noticed that it was evident from Madame Hong's speech and expression that she held this Wei Xiaobao in such a high regard, moreover, there had never been any outsider who spent the night in the Cult Leader's 'Immortal Good Fortune Residence'. By enjoying special privilege like this, clearly the White Dragon Envoy's status was above the other four envoys. These youngsters had been on guard duty in here for a while, they did not know about the incident that had just happened in the main hall, but seeing Wei Xiaobao was in such an honored position and was in the Cult Leader's good grace, they all did everything they could to please him.

That same afternoon Wei Xiaobao asked those several

teenagers in white clothes about all kinds of customs of the Five Dragon Gates. Turned out the Divine Dragon Cult was divided into five gates, each gate envoy commanded several dozen of old *xiongdi*, a hundred teenagers, and several hundred ordinary Cult members. Each *Zhangmenshi* was originally a veteran martial art expert who had established great service to the Cult. But recently the Cult Leader had thrown his full support to promote some rising stars, often people in their twenties, to hold important positions second only to the *Zhangmenshi*. Although Wei Xiaobao was very young, nobody showed the least bit of surprise.

The next morning, Hong Jiaozhu and Madame Hong called for another assembly in the main hall. There was anxiety and uneasy expression on everybody's face. Although the Cult Leader had sworn an oath not to pursue this matter, he was known as extremely shrewd, nobody could guess what kind of formidable method he would use to deal with them.

The Cult Leader and Madame sat on their thrones. Wei Xiaobao was fourth among the Five Dragon Envoys, he ranked above Fat Toutuo and Mr. Lu. "How is the Blue Dragon Envoy's injury?" the Cult Leader asked.

Mr. Lu bowed and said, "Reporting to Jiaozhu: the Blue Dragon Envoy's injury is not light, whether his life can be saved or not, at the present it is still very difficult to say."

The Cult Leader took a deep red small porcelain bottle from his bosom and said, "Here are three 'King of Heaven's Life-saving Pills', give them to him." While saying that, without anybody seeing him raising his hand, the porcelain bottle flew slowly toward Mr. Lu.

Hastily Mr. Lu reached out to receive it. Lying prostrate on the floor, he said, "Thank you Jiaozhu for your great graciousness." He knew these 'King of Heaven's Life-saving Pills' to be very rare. The Cult Leader had to dispatch his subordinates to gather

countless rare drug ingredients and had to refine it before making the pills. Among the ingredients were three-hundred-year old Laoshan [lit. old mountain] ginseng, white bear's gall, snow lotus herb and other especially hard-to-come-by substances. The Cult Leader had spent considerable effort to manufacture the pills, but he managed to produce only around ten pills. With these three miracle cure pills, Xu Xueting's life would definitely be out of danger.

The rest of the old *xiongdi* also bowed to express their gratitude; they all thought, "The Blue Dragon Envoy has offended Jiaozhu really bad yesterday by determining to take his life, yet today Jiaozhu bestowed the treasured medicine instead. He has let bygones be bygones indeed." No one did not feel gratified. At first everybody in the hall was in high alert, but now their faces showed smiling expression. Quite a few of them let out a deep breath.

Madame Hong said with a laugh, "White Dragon Envoy, I heard that on Mount Wutai you saw a stone tablet, on which some writings in tadpole script were engraved?"

Wei Xiaobao bowed and said, "Yes!"

Fat Toutuo said, "Reporting to Jiaozhu and Madame: subordinate has made a rubbing of the writings and I have it in here." From his bosom he took out a roll of oil paper and opened it, showing a large sheet of rubbings from the tablet, which he then hung on the eastern wall. The sheet had a black background with white characters, the writings looked extremely strange, nobody recognize the characters.

Madame Hong said, "White Dragon Envoy, if you know these characters, please read it for everybody here."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied. With eyes fixed on the rubbing, he loudly recited the writings made by Mr. Lu: "In the tenth month of the Zhen Guan’s second year Jiazi of the Great Tang ..."

Slowly he continued reciting from memory. Occasionally he would forget, so he said, "Um, what character is that? It's difficult to recognize. Ah right, must be a 'mo' [devil] character."

When reciting the part that said 'He will enjoy immortal happiness forever, universal evil spirit will venerate him. His long life will be the same as the Heaven’s, a kind sage of both pen and sword', he changed it to 'He, together with Madame, will enjoy immortal happiness forever, universal evil spirit will venerate them. Their long life will be the same as the Heaven’s, kind sages of both pen and sword.'

In all honesty, this four-character phrase 'together with Madame' [lian tong fu ren] was rather vulgar; if it was composed by Mr. Lu, he would definitely pick a more elegant wording. But Wei Xiaobao did not have any literary skill, how could he produce any elegant phrase? It was already remarkable that he did not change a four-character sentence into a five-character one.

When Madame Hong heard this phrase, 'her brows raised in delight, her eyes laughing' as she said, "Jiaozhu, there is indeed a reference on me in the writings of the stone tablet, the White Dragon Envoy did not carelessly make it up."

Hong Jiaozhu was also very happy; he nodded and said with a laugh, "Good, good! We are fulfilling the Heaven's destiny; the founding of this Shen Long Jiao was actually foretold by the Heaven during the Zhen Guan year of the Great Tang."

The cult members in the hall shouted together, “Jiaozhu will enjoy immortal good fortune forever, his long life will be the same as the heaven's.”

Priest Wugen and the other old *xiongdi* were also amazed, they thought, "Jiaozhu and Madame are fulfilling the Heaven's destiny, we must not offend them."

Finally Wei Xiaobao recited the locations of the eight copies of

the 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra'. Madame Hong gasped and said, "When virtuous ruler arose, it is to the benefit of the common people. No doubt the Heaven has arranged it early on, even a man like Wu Sangui is already mentioned in the Heaven's will. Jiaozhu, these eight copies of treasured sutra belong to our Cult, sooner or later they will be acquired for our Shen Long Jiao.”

The Cult Leader twisted his beard and said with a smile, "Madame is right."

The people yelled again, "Jiaozhu's long life will be the same as the heaven's, Jiaozhu's long life will be the same as the heaven's!”

When the shouting subsided, Hong Jiaozhu said, "Now, let us open the Incense Hall to inaugurate Wei Xiaobao as our Cult's White Dragon Gate's *Zhangmenshi*."

The opening of the incense hall of Shen Long Jiao was completely different from Tian Di Hui. Wei Xiaobao saw five golden trays on the incense table, each tray had a small snake on it, altogether there were blue, yellow, scarlet, white and black snakes. These five little snakes raised their heads, flicking their tongues in and out, but their bodies were motionless.

After doing obeisance toward these five 'divine dragons', Wei Xiaobao kowtowed in front of the Cult Leader and Madame, and accepted Priest Wugen and the others' congratulations. Madame Hong poured three cups of realgar wine and had him drink it. She said with a laugh, "After drinking this wine, the divine dragons on this island will know that you are one of our own, hereafter they will not come to bite you." The Cult Leader bestowed him a strand of realgar bead, telling him to hang it next to his skin, so that a hundred poisons would not harm him. Next, the elders and young men of the White Dragon Gate came to pay their respect to their new *Zhangmenshi*.

The Cult Leader ordered, "Because the Blue Dragon Gate *Zhangmenshi* is recuperating from his illness, and Fat Toutuo has set up a merit by making the rubbing of the stone tablet, Fat Toutuo will temporarily handle the Blue Dragon Gate's business. When the Blue Dragon Envoy recovers, he will take over again." Fat Toutuo bowed to accept the order. The Cult Leader continued, "Five Dragon Envoys and Lu Gaoxuan, six people, come to the rear hall to discuss official business."

Immediately the Cult Leader and Madame rose from their seats and walked toward the rear hall, while everybody shouted loudly to see them off. Priest Wugen, Wei Xiaobao, Fat Toutuo, Mr. Lu and the others followed behind them. It was only then that Wei Xiaobao knew that Mr. Lu's name was Lu Gaoxuan.

The rear hall was located right behind the main hall. It was not big, with two large bamboo chairs inside, where he Cult Leader and Madame sit. Below the chairs there were five low stools. The three *Zhangmenshi* sat down. Fat Toutuo also sat down. He said, "White Dragon Envoy, please sit down."

Seeing Mr. Lu did not have a seat, Wei Xiaobao hesitated a little bit. Mr. Lu smiled and said, "White Dragon Envoy, please sit down. There is no seat for a Cult member without any obligations like me in the 'Hidden Dragon Hall'."

Wei Xiaobao expected it was indeed the custom; if Fat Toutuo was not acting on behalf of the Blue Dragon Envoy, he would not have any seat either, thereupon he sat down. Mr. Lu stood up next to the Black Dragon Envoy, a position below him.

Suddenly Yin Jin and the others, four people, stood up. Wei Xiaobao did not understand what was going on, he also stood up. He heard Yin Jin, Mr. Lu and the others, five people, were reciting, “With Jiaozhu’s treasured teaching ..." Wei Xiaobao immediately followed, "... always in our hearts, we can set up meritorious deed and subdue the enemy, nothing is unachievable!” He still had a child's high-pitched voice, so

compared to the five people's voices, his sounded somewhat louder. Only after Hong Jiaozhu nodded did the five people sit down.

Hong Jiaozhu said, "The writings on the stone tablet reveal that there are eight copies of 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra' scattered around the four directions, yet the Black Dragon Envoy reported that four copies are actually in the Imperial Palace; what's the story?"

The Black Dragon Envoy said, "It may be assumed that these four books were originally from Shaolin Temple, Mu Palace and so on, which, afterwards, were seized away by the Tatars and brought into the Palace." The Cult Leader hesitated for a moment and did not say anything; the fear on the Black Dragon Envoy's face grew more intense.

Hong Jiaozhu turned toward Fat Toutuo and asked, "Has your *Shixiong* sent any news back?"

Fat Toutuo respectfully said, "Reporting to Jiaozhu: Thin Toutuo once said that at the Banner Commander of Bordered Blue Banner's mansion he had found a little bit of clue, but afterwards he lost track of it."

Wei Xiaobao's heart was moved, "The Banner Commander of Bordered Blue Banner's mansion?" he mused, "Isn't that the place where Tao *Gugu*'s Shifu went? Turns out Fat Toutuo have a *shixiong*, who is called Thin Toutuo."

He heard Hong Jiaozhu said, "Tell him that I order him to finish up his investigation as soon as possible, he must not be negligent." Fat Toutuo repeatedly complied.

After a while, Madame Hong smiled and said, "The Black Dragon Envoy has sent people into the Palace to fetch the sutra. According to his own explanation, he had spared no effort, but so far he had not succeeded in obtaining even one copy. Perhaps we ought to send someone else whose luck is a

lot better to handle this matter."

The Yellow Dragon Envoy Yin Jin hastily said, "Madame has a wise opinion. Learning from experience, fetching the sutra is a matter of luck, with enormous responsibility. It's not that the Black Dragon Envoy did not try hard and did not want to perform a meritorious deed for Jiaozhu, it's just that from the beginning there are obstacles one after another. Most likely it is because his luck is inadequate, thereupon the treasured sutra cannot be obtained."

Madame Hong smiled and said, "In your opinion, whose luck is adequate?"

Yin Jin said, "The one with most luck in our Cult is naturally Jiaozhu, the Senior, himself; next in line would be Madame. However, we must not toil your two honorable selves to go into action personally. The next person with great fortune would be the White Dragon Envoy. He knows the inscriptions on the stone tablet, he has also established a great service. There is a faint red glow at the center of his forehead, a sign that his luck is very big, there is no one among Jiaozhu's subordinate can surpass him."

The Cult Leader twisted his beard and said with a smile, "But he is a small child, can he handle this great matter?"

Although the White Dragon Envoy was a senior position within the Divine Dragon Cult, in Wei Xiaobao’s heart it did not mean anything. Since he was stuck on the Island, he was forced to take whatever comes his way. He had extreme satisfaction in looking at Madame Hong’s ‘bashful flower obstructing the moon’ beauty, but if he looked at her too much, Jiaozhu would detect his lecherous look, then it would be difficult for him to escape death. In short, it would be best if he could return to Beijing as soon as possible. Hearing Jiaozhu’s words, he found the perfect opportunity to free himself; thereupon he said, “Jiaozhu, Madame, I am indebted of your promotion; subordinate is very

grateful. I do not have any ability, but relying on the good fortune of the two of you, I have the hope that I can succeed in sneaking into the Palace and steal the four copies of the treasured sutra."

Hong Jiaozhu nodded. Madame Hong happily said, "You are willing to volunteer, showing that you are loyal to Jiaozhu. I know you are smart and witty, plus have great good fortune. Perhaps you are precisely the person sent by the Heaven to complete this important matter for Jiaozhu."

Hong Jiaozhu slowly said, "According to the Black Dragon Envoy's report, the people he sent to the Palace have sent information that the young Emperor has a little eunuch under his command by the name of Xiao Guizi …"

Wei Xiaobao was shocked. "My trickery is exposed! I am in big trouble," he mused. He heard the Cult Leader continued, "… the young Emperor sent him to Mount Wutai, the intention is not favorable to our Cult. We sent several people in succession to question him. Zhang Laosan could not find him, Fat Toutuo also failed, unexpectedly Xiao Guizi cannot be found, but we found you instead."

As the Cult Leader took a short pause, Yin Jin said, "Indeed that is Jiaozhu's flood of good fortune fills the heavens!"

Hong Jiaozhu slightly nodded his head toward him and continued, "White Dragon Envoy, as soon as you get to the Palace, you must immediately investigate this Xiao Guizi's matter: what scheme did the Emperor have of sending him to Mount Wutai?"

Wei Xiaobao was so scared that his entire body was drenched in cold sweat. "Yes, yes," he busily said. But he was relieved that from the Cult Leader's tone, he would definitely be sent to the Imperial Palace. Cast a glance toward Fat Toutuo, he mused, "You did not reveal my secret, I consider you a good

person.”

Madame Hong said, “It is said that those eight copies of 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra' hide a big secret to build up strength and maintain, as well as, prolong life. Seeing that since our Jiaozhu has received the Heaven’s blessing to enjoy immortal good fortune forever and life as long as the heaven’s, sooner or later these eight sutras will fall into Jiaozhu’s hands. White Dragon Envoy, go and set up a great merit for Jiaozhu, bring those eight sutras back, Jiaozhu will definitely bestow you with rewards.”

Wei Xiaobao stood up, he bowed and said, “Even if subordinate’s body is torn and my bones crushed, it is still difficult to repay Jiaozhu and Madame’s great kindness. I will be utterly loyal serving the country and die in battle.” He learned these eight characters ‘utterly loyal serving the country and die in battle’ [jin zhong bao guo, ma ge guo shi] from the storyteller; whenever a general was going into battle, the sovereign king would encourage him, and then the great general would fervently utter these eight characters. He blindly imitated the words, although being used here it was a bit too much and a little nondescript.

Madame Hong laughed and said, “You vow loyalty and devotion to Jiaozhu, that’s very good. You go to Beijing, you may choose several people to help you as you wish.”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “Since I am running away, if the Cult people follow, they will only tie my hands and tie my feet.” Thereupon he said, “I am afraid with too many people our secret will be revealed. Ah, right, subordinate wants to select one or two young girls under the Scarlet Dragon Envoy, they can be disguised as palace maid; handling affairs in the Palace will be more convenient.” He was thinking about Mu Jianping, he must take her away.

Priest Wugen said, “I am afraid those little misses are useless,

but as long as Jiaozhu and Madame approve, you may choose as you wish."

"Thank you *Daozhang*," Wei Xiaobao said.

Lu Gaoxuan said, "Reporting to Jiaozhu, Madame: subordinate has committed grave offense yesterday, I am very grateful of Jiaozhu's graciousness in not killing me …"

Hong Jiaozhu waved his hand and said with knitted brows, "The matter of yesterday, everybody must not remember in his heart, from now on nobody is allowed to raise it again."

"Yes," Lu Gaoxuan said, "Thank you very much Jiaozhu. Subordinate is thinking of accompanying the White Dragon Envoy. With Jiaozhu and Madame's great fortune, perhaps I will be able to set up some merit for Jiaozhu, to show a little of subordinate's sincere appreciation."

Hong Jiaozhu nodded his head and said, "Lu Gaoxuan is extremely resourceful, his martial art skill is superior, his penmanship is even more proficient, the literary works he made was well organized. Very good, very good, you may go with the White Dragon Envoy."

Lu Gaoxuan considered carefully, "He said the literary works I made was well organized, could it be that about my fabrication of the writings on the stone tablet, in his heart he has already known it well?"

Fat Toutuo said, "Reporting to Jiaozhu, Madame: subordinate also wishes to accompany the White Dragon Envoy to Beijing to handle this matter for Jiaozhu."

The Cult Leader nodded; seeing that the Yellow Dragon Envoy was about to volunteer too, he said, "Too many people already, I am afraid the mission will be compromised. Only the two of you will accompany. In everything, you must follow the White Dragon Envoy's order, you must not disobey."

Lu Gaoxuan and Fat Toutuo bowed and said, “Subordinate will do as you bid.”

From her bosom Madame Hong took out a small multi-colored dragon, it was molded from ‘blue copper’ [i.e. bronze], yellow gold, scarlet copper, white silver, and black iron. “White Dragon Envoy,” she said, “This is Jiaozhu’s Five-Dragon Command, I am handing it over to you for the time being. When the several tens of thousands Cult members see this Command, it is the same as they see Jiaozhu in person. In handling this important matter, the life-and-death power is being handed over to you. After rendering the meritorious service, you must return the Command.”

“Yes,” Wei Xiaobao said, with both hands he respectfully received it, while in his heart he mused, “I just want to return to Beijing, and forget about his Divine Dragon Cult or Vicious Tiger Cult. By taking this so-called Five-Dragon Command, from now on I will have more trouble.”

Madame Hong said, “White Dragon Envoy, Lu Gaoxuan and Fat Toutuo, three people stay, the rest of you are dismissed.”

Priest Wugen and the Black Dragon Envoy, Yellow Dragon Envoy, three people saluted and withdrew.

Hong Jiaozhu took out a black porcelain bottle from his pocket and poured three vermillion red pills out. He said, “I commend you that using extreme force of will, the three of you will go to Beijing on a mission, hence I bestow each one of you with a ‘leopard embryo tendon altering pill’.”

Immediately on Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan’s faces appeared a delight mixed with dread. Bending their right knees, they expressed their gratitude, received the pills, and swallowed it. Wei Xiaobao blindly imitated them, he received the ‘leopard embryo tendon altering pill’ and immediately swallowed it. Shortly afterward, he felt a burst of warm *chi* rising up in his

stomach, following the blood flow, dispersing slowly into his four limbs and hundred bones of his body; it was unspeakably comfortable.

Madame Hong said, “White Dragon Envoy may stay, the rest of you are dismissed.” Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan, two people withdrew.

Madame Hong smiled and said, “White Dragon Envoy, what kind of weapon do you use?”

Wei Xiaobao said, “Subordinate’s martial art skill is shallow and minuscule, and have not studied any weapon. I only have a dagger to protect myself.”

“Let me look at it,” Madame Hong said.

Wei Xiaobao pulled the dagger from his boot, turned the hilt around and presented it with both hands. Madame Hong took it. After examining it, she praised, “Good dagger!” Pulling a strand of her hair, she let it go. The hair slowly dropped on the edge of the blade, and was cut into two. “Good!” the Cult Leader also praised.

In term of personal character, Wei Xiaobao did not have any strong points, but he had always regarded wealth and worldly possessions extremely lightly; seeing Madame Hong was very delighted with the dagger, he thought that if he wanted to flatter her, he would have to go all out. He said, “Subordinate presents this dagger to Madame. The common saying says it well: rouge and treasured sword must … must be presented to beautiful woman. Among the beautiful women in the world, no one is more beautiful than Madame.” He had heard the storyteller said it many times, ‘the treasured sword must be presented to the martyr, the red powder must be presented to beautiful woman.’ But these two phrases were simply too difficult, he could not remember everything clearly.

Madame Hong giggled tenderly and said, “Good child, you are

loyal to us; you are not simply making empty promises. I don’t have anything good to give you, how can I take a child’s belonging? Let me accept your good intention with gratitude. Come, I am going to teach you three self-defense and life-saving styles, it is called the ‘Beauties' Three Moves’. I want you to learn it by heart.”

She stepped down from her seat, took out a handkerchief, and tied the dagger to the outside of her right calf. “Jiaozhu,” she said with a laugh, “I will have to toil your honorable self to help me demonstrate this martial art style.”

With a chuckle Hong Jiaozhu strolled over. Suddenly he reached out with his left hand and grabbed the back of Madame’s neck, and lifted her up in the air. “Ah!” it happened so fast, Wei Xiaobao was so shocked that he cried out.

Madame Hong bent her body slightly, she twisted her slender waist, and kicked backward with her left leg toward the Cult Leader’s lower abdomen. The Cult Leader pulled back to evade. Madame Hong seized the opportunity to turn around and wrapped her left arm around Jiaozhu’s neck. Unexpectedly her right hand grabbed the dagger and stabbed it against the middle of Jiaozhu’s back. “This is the first move,” she said with a laugh, “It’s called ‘the imperial concubine’s retrospect’. Remember this.”

The move was very neat and agile, Wei Xiaobao watched with ‘heart untroubled, spirit pleased’. “Wonderful!” he cheered loudly, while thinking, “When Fat Toutuo grabbed me and lifted me up the other day, I did not have the least bit of technique. If I had learned this move early on, I would have stabbed him to death.”

The Cult Leader gently laid Madame Hong on the ground. Madame Hong tied the dagger back on the outside of her calf and lay facing down on the floor. Jiaozhu stretched out his right foot to step on her lower back. Pretending he was holding a

knife in his hand, he placed his hand behind her neck and said with a laugh, “Do you surrender?”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “In this situation, what can I do? Naturally I would call out loudly ‘Surrender’.”

Suddenly he saw Madame pulled her head toward her own chest, naturally the enemy’s knife threatening her neck fell into empty air. Seizing this opportunity, she rolled on the ground and drilled through under Jiaozhu’s crotch. Grabbing the dagger with her right hand, once again she punched the middle of Jiaozhu’s back, only the sharp point of the dagger was facing up. If it were real enemy, this dagger would naturally pierce the enemy’s back.

Wei Xiaobao loudly cheered again, “Good!”

Jiaozhu waited for her to tie the dagger again before pulling both of her hands behind her back. With his left hand he held both of her wrists; pretending to hold a weapon in his right hand, he placed the weapon on her soft, white neck, while saying with a laugh, “This time you can’t run away.”

Madame also laughed and said, “Watch carefully!” Her right foot kicked forward lightly, a white light flashed, the dagger had already cut off the handkerchief tying it to her calf and flew away. She hooked with her right foot and nudged the hilt of the dagger. The dagger shot swiftly back toward her throat.

“Careful!” Wei Xiaobao cried out in fear. He saw she shrank her body down, the dagger shot swiftly toward the Cult Leader’s chest. The Cult Leader let her hands go and threw his body back with face up in the ‘iron panel bridge’ stance. ‘Pop!’ the dagger flitted across his chest and penetrated the bamboo wall behind him, straight up to the hilt.

When Madame Hong hooked with her foot and kicked the dagger, Wei Xiaobao had already jumped in fright. When he saw the dagger was flying toward her throat, she appeared not be

able to evade, but then the dagger flew toward the pit of Jiaozhu's stomach; this time he was sure the dagger would hit him, but unexpectedly Jiaozhu was able to dodge. These turns of events were extremely dangerous that just by watching from the side, Wei Xiaobao was stunned with 'heart alarmed, trembling in fear', and the word 'Good' that was already in his throat could not get out.

Madame Hong laughed. "What do you think?" she asked.

Wei Xiaobao reached out to grab the back of a chair as if he was about to fall. "It scared me to death," he said.

Hong Jiaozhu, Hong Antong, and Madame saw his paled countenance, indicating he was terribly frightened. Hearing his words, they were more delighted than listening to one thousand, ten thousand words of praise. These two people had superior martial art skill, just another word of praise from a little child was not enough to make them happier, but seeing he was so concerned, they knew he was truly loyal to them. Madame Hong asked a rhetorical question, "The dagger was not shot toward you, what are you scared of?"

"I was afraid … I was afraid it would hurt Madame and … and Jiaozhu," Wei Xiaobao replied.

Madame Hong laughed. "Silly kid," she said, "How could it easily hurt Jiaozhu? This move is called 'the flying swallow circle around overhead'. It is not very easy to practice. Jiaozhu's divine skill is unrivalled, even if he did not know it beforehand, this move won't hurt him. But in the world, other than him, I am afraid the number of people who are able to dodge this surprise strike is not too many."

Immediately she explained in details the technique to practice the 'Beauties' Three Moves'. Although the style only had three moves, all four limbs of the body were heavily involved; she taught him how to pull the dagger, how to pull down the head,

the speed, the position, the force, as well as the accuracy of the movements, must be just perfect.

The second move, where she lay on the ground, was called the ‘Xiao Lian [lit. little pity] lies in disarray’. Madame Hong explained, “This ‘Beauties' Three Moves’ uses the names of the beauties of the ancient times. If it was practiced by a man, unavoidably it would be rather indecent; luckily you are only a child, so it’s not a big deal.”

Wei Xiaobao learned every move and every style, while Madame Hong patiently and carefully correcting his mistakes. After teaching him for more than two hours she finally considered it enough. But she insisted that Wei Xiaobao must be able to use it perfectly, he must train hard for a long time, especially the third move ‘the flying swallow circle around overhead’; a slight mistake, he would have killed himself. Madame Hong instructed him to make a blunt dagger made of lead, the size and the weight must be the same as his dagger, to be used during practice.

In front of the Cult members, usually Hong Antong was very serious in maintaining his dignity, he would not casually speak or laugh; but this time, as he accompanied his wife teaching Wei Xiaobao, he kept chuckling while watching from the side, he was surprisingly patient. When Madame finished teaching, he said, "Madame's ‘Beauties' Three Moves’ is indeed formidable, but it is meant to kill. Let me teach you the 'Heroes' Three Moves', with the purpose of subduing the enemy, dead or alive."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted; he kneeled down and said, "Thank you Jiaozhu."

Madame Hong laughed and said, "I have never heard about your 'Heroes' Three Moves'. You are teaching it to your disciple, but you did not teach it to me."

Hong Antong said with a laugh, "Just now I watched your ‘Beauties' Three Moves’ and came up with it, I don't know whether it will work. I want you to give me directions."

Madame Hong cast him a sidelong glance. "Aiyo," she said with an enchanting smile, "Our Great Jiaozhu is teasing me."

Hong Antong said, "From the beginning heroes can never pass the barrier of beauties. It's only natural that 'Heroes' Three Moves' cannot surpass ‘Beauties' Three Moves’."

Madame Hong burst into another enchanting laughter. "In front of a child, you still say this kind of talk?" she said in a tender voice.

Hong Antong realized he had somewhat forgotten his manners. He coughed and with a solemn expression said, "The White Dragon Envoy is young, when he fight, it will be easy for the enemy to grab the back of his neck and lift him up. Madame, let's pretend I am the White Dragon Envoy."

Madame Hong laughed and said, "You must promise not to hurt me."

"Naturally," Hong Antong replied.

Madame Hong stretched out her left hand to grab him and lift him up. Hong Antong was tall and powerfully built, perhaps he weighed around a hundred and seventy or eighty *catties*. Madame Hong looked frail and timid, unexpectedly she was able to lift him up seemingly without any effort.

"Watch carefully!" Hong Antong said. His left hand slowly reached back and scratched below Madame Hong's left armpit. Madame Hong giggled, her body turned soft. Hong Antong's left hand grasped her armpit, his right hand slowly turned back to grab her collar, and then slowly he lifted her up over the top of his own head, and gently flung her away. When Madame Hong's body touched the ground, it slipped away as if she was floating on the water surface. Madame Hong did not stop laughing,

when her body stopped moving, she was still lying down on the floor, unable to stand up.

Just now Hong Antong scratched below her armpit, reached back and grabbed her, and flung her away, each movement was very slow, Wei Xiaobao was able to see everything clearly. He saw his movements were elegant, and unspeakably attractive; although he moved slowly, it was very efficient. The scratch, the grab, and the throw were amazing; compared to Madame Hong's fast and nimble movements, obviously it was several times more difficult.

Madame Hong laughed and said, "You tickled me. What kind of hero was that?" While saying that, she slowly stood up.

Hong Antong smiled and said, "It was a genuine hero's movement. Naturally I did not mean to tickle you, but if the White Dragon Envoy was grabbed and lifted up by the enemy, his 'da zhui' [big spine] acupoint must also be caught by the enemy. It is where the three 'yang du' [positive control] arteries of the hands and feet meet, his entire body will devoid of any strength, all he can do is using his finger to lightly scratching the enemy's 'ji quan' [extreme spring] acupoint below his armpit. This acupoint belongs to the hand's 'shao yang' [lesser yang] channel, the enemy will have no choice but to let go. If the White Dragon Envoy has the strength, he could fling the enemy over his head, while at the same time seal the ‘xiao hai’ [little ocean] acupoint behind the enemy’s elbow and 'ji quan' acupoint underneath his armpit, so that when he was thrown to the ground, he won’t be able to move a single step.”

Wei Xiaobao clapped his hands and said with a laugh, “This move is really amazing.”

Hong Antong said, “After you practice it well, execute the move the faster the better.” And then he lay on the floor. Madame Hong stretched out her foot to heavily step on his lower back. With her right hand she reached the door bolt

leaning against the wall next to the door, and she placed it on his neck. With a sweet and tender voice she laughed and said, “Do you surrender?”

Hong Antong laughed and said, “I already surrendered long ago! Let me kowtow to you.” He pulled his legs as if he was about to kowtow, but his right arm slowly reached horizontally forward to touch the door bolt. ‘Crack!’ the door bolt unexpectedly broke.

Wei Xiaobao jumped in fright. If Hong Antong’s arm moved rapidly, based on his martial art skill, it would not be strange if he could strike the door bolt broken. But he was moving slowly and he only touched the door bolt, yet unexpectedly the door bolt broke; it was indeed beyond his expectation.

Hong Antong said, “Pull your legs pretending to kowtow, take the opportunity to pull your dagger. Although your hands do not have internal energy like mine, but your dagger is exceptionally sharp, whatever weapon the enemy has, you can cut and break it.” While his mouth was busy explaining, his body suddenly tumbled between Madame Hong’s legs.

Wei Xiaobao was startled; he thought Hong Antong was a respected Cult Leader, how could he crawl in between a woman’s legs? Although she was his own wife, it would still be improper. To his surprise, however, Hong Antong was not really crawling, he was just striking an attitude, with his left hand he grasped Madame’s right ankle, with his right hand he pretended to strike her lower abdomen, while saying, “With your dagger that can cut iron like mud, even if the enemy has gargantuan guts, he won’t dare to struggle.” Finished speaking, he slowly stood up, bringing Madame Hong along with head down, feet up. Madame Hong laughed and said, "Quickly let me go, what are you doing?"

Hong Antong laughed aloud, he wrapped his right arm around her waist and let her go. He said, "White Dragon Envoy, you are

short, you won't be able to lift the enemy, but you can grab his ankle and pull him. Even if you cannot lift him up, with your dagger on his lower abdomen, the enemy won't have any choice but surrender. And then you can kick the 'shen zang' [divine reservoir], 'shen feng' [divine seal], 'bu lang' [walkway/corridor] acupoints on the pit of his stomach several times, to guard against him retaliating."

Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted. "Yes, yes!" he said, "I must kick him."

Hong Antong put his hands behind his back, letting the Madame seize him. Madame Hong picked the half broken door bolt and placed it on his neck. Hong Antong laughed and said, "The enemy is seizing my hands, naturally the main arteries on my wrists are being held, rendering my hands incapable. It's hard to strike back. In this situation, it should have been best to use your leg ..."

Before he even finished speaking, "Ah!" Madame Hong screamed. She laughed and let her hands go, and then leaped back. With a blushing face she said, "You must not teach a child to use such an obscene move."

Hong Antong laughed and said, "What's so obscene about the 'Pulling-up Yin Kick'?" His face turned serious as he continued, "The genital is a vital point on a human body, it can be fatal when hit. All the prestigious schools and big sects often have this 'Pulling-up Yin Kick' move within their punching and kicking techniques. Shaolin Pai has it, Wudang Pai also has it; nothing unusual. It's just that the enemy is behind you, both of your hands are under the enemy's control, and there is a blade on your neck; your only choice is to use the 'Pulling-up Yin Back Kick'."

Speaking to this point, he paused for a moment before continuing, "But the enemy must have guarded against you using this move. As soon as he sees your leg moves, most

likely he would chop your little head down first. Consequently, this 'Pulling-up Yin Back Kick' may be quite useless."

He put his hands behind his back again and let Madame Hong held his wrists. Suddenly he bent all ten of his fingers, forming a half sphere, and then he threw his entire body backward, while all ten of his fingers grabbed Madame Hong's breasts.

Madame Hong quickly stepped back, hence she was forced to release her grip. She spat and said, "What kind of hero's move is this?"

Showing a faint smile, Hong Antong said, "The 'ru zhong' [breast center] and 'ru gen' [breast root] acupoints on human's chest, doesn't matter on men or women, are two fatal major acupoints. White Dragon Envoy, since the enemy can capture your hands behind your back, obviously his martial art skill is not weak; besides, most likely he has seized the acupoint on your wrists. But even if he did, it is not a big deal; as soon as he sees you making this move, he would involuntary step back. By the time he remembers that your hands do not have any strength, he is already one step too late. Madame, seize my hands again."

Madame Hong took two steps forward and gently tapped the back of his hand, and then she reached out with her left hand to grab his wrists, while leaning her upper body backward to avoid his fingers from bumping against her chest.

"Watch carefully!" Hong Antong said. Again he threw his body backward, while his ten fingers made a fake move toward her chest. Madame Hong knew this grab was a fake move, but she still pulled back to evade. Hong Antong suddenly made a somersault, his body leaped backward, his legs parted, and he landed on her shoulder, while the thumbs of both hands pressing on her 'tai yang' [sun] acupoint [temples], index fingers pressing on her eyebrows, and middle fingers on her eyes. He said, "If I add a bit more strength to my middle

fingers, I will poke the enemy's eyes blind; if I add a bit more strength to my thumbs, the enemy will pass out. But I must guard against the enemy's counterattack."

He made another somersault in the air, and jumped more than a *zhang* backward. His right hand reached toward his calf, pretending to pull out the dagger. With the dagger pointing outward, left palm slanting up, he said, "If you poke the enemy's eyes and blind him, the force with which he would use to throw you off must be incomparably formidable. You must guard against him trying to grab you firmly and won't let you go."

Wei Xiaobao saw that this move was really complicated, just like a team of clowns in the circus trying to provoke laughter, but it was very effective to dodge the enemy's blade and hold the enemy's vital points under control. He sighed and said, "This move is really good, but it is very difficult to learn."

Hong Antong said, "Although I only teach you three moves, these moves contain *qin na*, acupoint sealing, and lightness, three types of martial art skill. If even one is not trained properly, these three moves cannot be used. Speaking about *qin na*, acupoint sealing, and lightness skills, each one needs ten years, eight years of training. But you only want to learn parts that are relevant to these three moves, it is a lot easier."

Immediately he explained the position of the acupoints, the *qin na* technique, and how to exert strength to the legs in lightness skill. He told Wei Xiaobao to try it several times and corrected the mistakes one by one. Only Wei Xiaobao did not dare to ride on his neck, Hong Antong also did not tell him to try that move.

"Jiaozhu," Madame Hong said, "My ‘Beauties' Three Moves’ were taught to me by Shifu, in the past I had to undergo 'a thousand hammer a hundred refinery' before I got it right. Your ‘Heroes' Three Moves’, on the other hand, seemingly appear out

of nowhere, it was created at will, yet it is a lot more formidable than my ‘Beauties' Three Moves’. I am not trying to flatter you on your face, but great scholar respected for learning and integrity, a martial art master with profound knowledge, is indeed worthy of other people's admiration."

Hong Antong cupped his fist and said with a laugh, "Madame's erroneous praise, I really do not dare to accept."

In the hall the previous day, seeing Hong Antong neither talked nor laughed, as if he was only a wooden puppet, in his heart Wei Xiaobao was holding him in utter contempt; he was already thinking, "An old man who look like a stupid blockhead, why is everybody so afraid of him?" But now that he had seen his true martial art skill, his mind was fixed and he had no doubt whatsoever that this man indeed deserved to be admired; he said, "Training a certain skill passed on by Shifu until it is completely mastered cannot be considered strange; Jiaozhu was just thinking about certain move and he is able to execute it casually just like that, now that can be considered unmatched in the world."

"Why do you consider it unmatched in the world?" Madame Hong asked.

Wei Xiaobao said, "Even if the enemy's skill was higher, Jiaozhu would simply use several new moves, the enemy would not recognize it, he would have no choice but to cry out loud 'Surrender!'"

Hong Antong and Madame laughed aloud. One nodded slightly, the other one said, "That's true."

"Jiaozhu," Madame Hong said, "My ‘Beauties' Three Moves’ have three beauties' names, your ‘Heroes' Three Moves’ are very formidable, they should also have three big heroes' names."

Hong Antong smiled and said, "Alright, let me think. The first

move is lifting up the enemy; that was Lintong lifting up Wu Zixu's cauldron. Let's call it 'Zixu lifting up the cauldron'."

Madame Hong said, "Good, Wu Zixu was a great hero."

Hong Antong said, "The second move throws the enemy down and pull him up; that was Lu Zhishen felling and pulling the weeping willow, let's call it 'Lu reaching and pulling the willow'."

"Very good," Madame Hong said, "Lu Zhishen was a great hero. Although your third move was ingenious, it carries a little bit of scoundrel or loafer's flavor, it does not seem to be too heroic ..." Speaking to this point, she broke into a tender giggle.

Hong Antong laughed and said, "What do you mean not too heroic? What kind of move would you call 'good' then? Hmm, my two index fingers were resting on your eyebrows; that was 'Zhang Chang drawing eyebrows'."

Madame Hong laughed and said, "Zhang Chang was not a hero; it was his wife who drew his eyebrows. Would you call that a heroic move?"

Hong Antong laughed and said, "He was having fun in the lady's chamber, and thus had his eyebrows drawn. Are you saying that by having his wife draw his eyebrows he was not a hero?" Madame Hong's cheeks blushed deep red; she shook her head.

Wei Xiaobao did not know which historical character this Zhang Chang was, he thought that by having his eyebrows drawn by his wife, not only he was not a hero, he was simply a coward man who was afraid of his wife. He did not understand that Hong Antong was using expression from literature to tease his wife. "Jiaozhu," he said, "In this third move you were riding on the enemy's neck. There were so many great heroes who ride a horse. Guan Yunchang rode a scarlet rabbit horse, Qin Shubao rode a chestnut horse."

Hong Antong laughed and said, "That's right, but Guan

Yunchang's scarlet rabbit horse originally belonged to Lu Bu. Qin Qiong also sold his chestnut horse. Both are not too appropriate. I got it, in this move Di Qing was taming the steed [orig. 'dragon colt'], a precious horse; let's call it 'Di Qing subduing the dragon'. The precious horse he was subduing was originally a dragon incarnated."

Madame Hong clapped her hands, "Wonderful!" she said, "When Di Qing went into battle, he always wore bronze devil mask to frighten the barbarian troops that they screamed in terror and fled into the wilderness; naturally he was a great hero. It's just that we are called Divine Dragon Cult ..."

Hong Jiaozhu smiled and said, "It doesn't matter. There will be time that even a dragon will be subdued by someone until he is docile."

"Pei!" Madame Hong spat, her entire face blushed, her beautiful and glistening eyes were filled charm.

Immediately Wei Xiaobao practiced the ‘Beauties' Three Moves’ and ‘Heroes' Three Moves’ one by one. Whenever his technique or stance was incorrect, Hong Antong and Madame would give him more directions. These six moves were really ingenious; it was difficult for Wei Xiaobao to master it all at once. Hong Jiaozhu told him not to worry, he only needed to know the training technique, when the time came, he would master it by himself.

By the time the instruction was finished, it was already noon. Madame Hong was determined not to accept the dagger; she gave it back to Wei Xiaobao while saying, "You have not mastered the martial art skill, this time you are on mission for Jiaozhu, you must have this kind of sharp weapon to protect yourself." And then she added, "White Dragon Envoy, in our Cult, other than myself, you are the only one who has received Jiaozhu's personal instruction."

Wei Xiaobao said, "That is truly subordinate's good fortune, which I cultivated over I don't know how many incarnations."

Madame Hong said, "By being loyal to Jiaozhu in handling this matter, you are repaying Jiaozhu's benevolence."

"Yes," Wei Xiaobao replied.

"You may leave now," Madame Hong said, "Early in the morning tomorrow, you go onboard the ship and leave with Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan; you don't need to come here to say goodbye again."

Wei Xiaobao complied. He respectfully saluted the two people before turning around. When he reached the door, he turned his head and said, "Madame, if I live to be 80 years old, how about Jiaozhu and Madame teach me three more moves?"

Madame Hong was slightly startled, but she understood immediately that it was his way of well-wishing and praise. Right now he was only thirteen, fourteen years old, it would be sixty more years before he reached eighty, but Jiaozhu and she had long lives, which were the same as the heavens', so it was only proper that they should live sixty more years. She giggled and said, "I promise you. On your eightieth birthday, Jiaozhu and I will teach you three more moves. When you reach the long life of a hundred years, we will teach you three more moves; it will be called 'Old Shouxing's three moves'[106], 'Old Grandma's three moves'."

"No," Wei Xiaobao said, "At that time, Madame will be as young and beautiful as today, most likely Madame and Jiaozhu will look a bit younger. The moves you teach me will be … will be … 'Golden Boy's three moves', 'Jade Maiden's three moves'." Hong Antong and Madame burst out in laughter.

Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan, two people, were sitting on a mountain rock outside the hall, they had been waiting for a long

time, but all along did not see Wei Xiaobao coming out of the hall. They were puzzled and anxious, not knowing what kind of unforeseen event had happened. When they saw his smiling expression as he went out, they were relieved. They wanted to ask, but did not dare to ask. Wei Xiaobao explained, “Jiaozhu and Madame have taught me not a few of amazing martial art skills.”

Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan said together, “Congratulations White Dragon Envoy. In our Cult, other than Madame, Jiaozhu has never taught anybody one move or half a style.”

Feeling extremely smug, Wei Xiaobao said, “Jiaozhu and Madame also said the same thing."

Lu Gaoxuan said, "White Dragon Envoy is fortunate to enjoy Jiaozhu's favor, indeed it has never happened since our Cult was founded." After casting a glance toward Fat Toutuo, he asked Wei Xiaobao, "Have Jiaozhu and Madame ever mentioned when they are going to bestow us the antidote of the ‘leopard embryo tendon altering pill’?"

Wei Xiaobao was surprised, "There is an antidote for this ‘leopard embryo tendon altering pill’?" he asked, "Are you saying ... are you saying ... this is a poison?"

"I can't say that it is a poison," Lu Gaoxuan replied, "Let us go home and talk in details." He cast several glances toward the bamboo hall, his face revealed a cautious mixed with dread expression.

The three of them returned to the Lu family's home. Seeing the Fat and Lu, two people's gloomy expression, Wei Xiaobao grew suspicious; he asked, "Just what is actually this ‘leopard embryo tendon altering pill’? Is it poison, or is it miracle pill?"

Fat Toutuo sighed and said, "Whether it is a poison or a miracle pill, we'll just have to wait and see! The lives of ours, three people, are entirely in the White Dragon Envoy's hands."

Wei Xiaobao was startled, "Why?" he asked.

Fat Toutuo looked at Lu Gaoxuan, Lu Gaoxuan nodded his head, Fat Toutuo said, "White Dragon Envoy, when people are being polite to me, they call me Fat Zunzhe [Revered Monk]. When they are not being polite, they would call me Fat Toutuo. But I am this thin, the name completely does not reflect the reality. Don't you think it is a bit strange?"

"That's right," Wei Xiaobao said, "I have been wondering for a while, I thought other people were just joking with you, so they call you that name. But Jiaozhu also calls you Fat Toutuo, the Senior can't be joking with you."

Fat Toutuo heaved a deep sigh; he said, "This is the second time I took the ‘leopard embryo tendon altering pill’; I am really hovering between life and death, until now I still often have nightmares about it. Originally I was very short and very fat. The name 'Fat Toutuo', three characters is a well deserved reputation."

"Ah," Wei Xiaobao said, "After taking the ‘leopard embryo tendon altering pill’ you turned tall and thin? That's very good! Right now your appearance is grand, while previously you were short and fat, certainly it was not as good as now?"

With a bitter laugh Fat Toutuo said, "You got it right. But think about it: a short and fat guy, within three months my body was suddenly being stretched three *chi*, the skin on my entire body was dripping blood; do you think it feels good? If not my luck was good, finally I reached Divine Dragon Island, and Jiaozhu was showing me great mercy by giving me the antidote, I am afraid I would have grown two more *chi*."

Wei Xiaobao was unable to restrain his amazement; he said, "The three of us have also taken this pill. For me to grow two more *chi* is not a big deal, but if you grow two more *chi*, you ... you will be too tall."

Fat Toutuo said, "The effect of this ‘leopard embryo tendon altering pill’ is really amazing, within one year after taking it, it can make the body strong and healthy; but if at the end of a year the antidote is not given, the violent side effect will flare up suddenly. Actually, it does not necessarily stretch human body. My *Shige*, Thin Toutuo was originally very tall, yet he suddenly became short. Originally he was thin, yet he swelled unbearably and turned into a completely fat person."

Wei Xiaobao laughed and said, "You, Fat Zunzhe has turned into Thin Zunzhe, the Thin Zunzhe has become Fat Zunzhe. If the two of you swap names, won't all your problems disappear?"

An angry look appeared on Fat Toutuo's face; he shook his head and said, "That won't do."

Wei Xiaobao promptly apologized, "I am sorry Fat Zunzhe, I was wrong; please do not get offended."

Fat Toutuo said, "You are wielding the Five-Dragon Command, I am your subordinate, even if you beat me or curse me, I cannot revolt; much less you did not intentionally want to hurt me. My *Shixiong* and I have substantially different temperament, character, appearance and voice, just by swapping the name 'Thin' and 'Fat' will not change Fat Zunzhe into Thin Zunzhe, and change Thin Zunzhe into Fat Zunzhe."

Wei Xiaobao nodded his head and said, "So that's what happened."

Fat Toutuo continued, "Five years ago, Jiaozhu sent *Shige* and I on a mission. That mission was very 'thorny'; by the time we finished it, we were already three days overdue. Immediately we embarked the boat and returned to the Island. On the boat the medicine suddenly flared up, the suffering was very difficult to bear. *Shige*'s temperament was very violent, his anger flared and in his madness, he kicked and broke the mast of the boat.

The ship then drifted on the sea. Day by day passed, I grew taller and taller, and thinner and thinner; he grew shorter and shorter, and fatter and fatter. This ‘leopard embryo tendon altering pill’ can stretch a short and fat person tall and slim, and press a tall and thin person short and fat; Hong Jiaozhu indeed has an extremely vast magical power. We were drifting like that for more than two months, at that time it was hard to say if the two of us would survive. We have finished eating the provision on the boat, we have killed the helmsman and the sailors one by one and ate them. By a struck of sheer luck we came across another boat, and were saved. We forced that boat to take us to the Divine Dragon Island immediately. Jiaozhu knew we finished the mission properly and did not tarry deliberately; thereupon he bestowed us with the antidote. It could be said that our two lives have just been snatched back."

The more Wei Xiaobao heard, the more he was alarmed; turning his head toward Lu Gaoxuan, he saw his expression was serious, so he knew Fat Toutuo was not lying. He said, "In that case, we have to obtain those eight copies of 'Forty-two-chapter Sutra' and return to the Divine Dragon Island within one year?"

Lu Gaoxuan said, "If we can obtain all eight copies of the Sutra, nothing can't be better; but isn't it easier said than done? As long as we manage to get one or two copies and hurry back, naturally Jiaozhu will bestow the antidote."

Wei Xiaobao mused, "I have six copies in my hand, when I really have to alternative, what’s so difficult to part with one or two copies to give to Jiaozhu?” Immediately he felt relieved and said with a laugh, “If Jiaozhu does not give us the antidote this time, maybe we, the young will become old, the old will become young. I will turn into a seventy, eighty years old man, the two of you will turn into little babies; won’t that be very interesting?”

Lu Gaoxuan's body trembled; he said, "That … that's absolutely must not happen." His voice was filled with terror. He continued, "I have single-mindedly pondered over this, most probably the 'leopard embryo tendon altering pill' was made of leopard fetus, deer fetus, the placenta, seal kidney, and other important supplement and rare drug ingredients to induce growth, mixed and refined together. The drug property is obviously to reverse the original body's characteristic. I am guessing that when Jiaozhu manufactured this drug, his intention was to recover human's youthful vigor, but when he tested it on someone else, the effect did not exactly follow his heart's desires; therefore … therefore …"

Wei Xiaobao picked up, "Therefore, Jiaozhu did not personally take the drug, but use it on his subordinates."

Lu Gaoxuan hastily said, "This is only my wild guess, it must not be considered as the truth. I am asking White Dragon Envoy never to raise this topic again."

"The two of you may set your hearts at ease," Wei Xiaobao said, "I guarantee that Jiaozhu will definitely give us the antidote. Please sit down, I have something to say to Miss Fang." He saw Mu Jianping the other day, hence he was eager to tell Fang Yi.

Lu Gaoxuan said, "Madame Hong has already summoned Miss Fang, she says White Dragon Envoy not to worry, as long as you wholeheartedly handle this matter for Jiaozhu, Miss Fang will only have good things on the island."

Wei Xiaobao was startled, "Miss … Miss Fang is not coming with us?" he asked.

"Madame Hong has already sent someone to fetch her," Lu Gaoxuan said, "She left a message to my wife and that's what she told her. Besides, that Mu Jianping, Miss Mu of the Scarlet Dragon Gate is in the same situation."

Wei Xiaobao groaned inwardly, just a moment ago he told Priest Wugen that he wanted to select several people from the Scarlet Dragon Gate to go with him, naturally he had Mu Jianping in his mind; who would have thought that Madame Hong had already anticipated this? With a trembling voice he asked, “Madame … Madame does not trust me?”

“This is our Cult’s rule,” Lu Gaoxuan replied, “Those who receive orders from Jiaozhu to go out on mission cannot take his family.”

With a forced laugh Wei Xiaobao said, “Those two Misses are not my family.”

“More or less, they are,” Lu Gaoxuan said.

Actually, Wei Xiaobao was thinking that the next day he would leave the Island with Fang and Mu, two women, and was so happy; but this instant he could not help but feeling dispirited. He mused, “Jiaozhu and Madame are indeed formidable, tying the ‘leopard embryo tendon altering pill’ on my head[107] is not enough, they still hold my first and young wives hostage.”

Early morning the following day, Wei Xiaobao had just woke up when he heard the sound of bugle horn, a lot of people were calling out from outside the door, “The White Dragon Gate disciples respectfully send off *Zhangmenshi* on his journey, to handle matters for Jiaozhu wholeheartedly.” This shout was followed by the sound of drums, string instruments and bamboo flutes.

Wei Xiaobao rushed out the door and saw about three, four hundred people were lining up outside the door. They all wore white clothes, young and old alike. Everybody shouted in chorus, “*Zhangmenshi* will win victory on raising the flag, will have instant success!”

After that, several dozen Cult members wearing blue clothes

also came to send off their acting *Zhangmenshi*, Fat Toutuo.

Wei Xiaobao's spirit rose, immediately he felt invigorated. Together with Fat Toutuo and Lu Gaoxuan, they board the ship. While he was exchanging salute with Priest Wugen, Zhang Danyue, Yin Jin, and the others who had earlier to bid them farewell, suddenly he heard the sound of hoof beats, two riders galloped toward the boat. The two riders were wearing white clothes, surprisingly, they were Fang Yi and Mu Jianping, two women. Wei Xiaobao was greatly delighted, his heart was thumping madly as he mused, "Could it be that Madame has changed her mind and let them go with me?"

Fang and Mu, two women dismounted their horses and took several steps forward. In a loud and clear voice Fang Yi said, "We received Jiaozhu and Madame's order to send White Dragon *Zhangmenshi* off on his journey."

Wei Xiaobao's heart sank, "They are only sending me off," he thought.

Fang Yi bowed and said, "Subordinates Fang Yi and Mu Jianping received order from Madame to transfer from the Scarlet Dragon Gate to White Dragon Gate, we are ready to receive White Dragon Envoy's order."

Wei Xiaobao was startled, but then he suddenly saw the light, "Turns out you … you have been Shen Long Jiao's member under the Scarlet Dragon Gate. Along the way you were only pretending on Jiaozhu's order to deceive me into coming to the Divine Dragon Island. Fat Revered Monk failed to invite me, you came to invite me using a gentle method." Thinking about it, he was very upset; originally he wanted to say some intimate words with those two women, but now he lost interest completely. Suddenly he remembered something and said to Lu Gaoxuan, "Mr. Lu, that servant girl who attend to me, Shuang'er, send someone to get her, I want take her along in this journey."

“This …” Lu Gaoxuan said.

Wei Xiaobao was angry, he shouted, “What ‘this’ or ‘that’? Get her, now!”

He shouted in a stern voice, Lu Gaoxuan did not dare to disobey. “Yes, yes!” he replied, and turned and said something to the attendant onboard the boat. The attendant leaped on shore and dashed away. Not too long afterwards, he saw two riders rushed rapidly over. The one on the front had a petite and slender figure, she was none other than Shuang’er.

Without pulling the reins, she called out, “*Gongzi*!” and leaped away from the saddle, lightly and deftly landed on the bow of the boat. In the eyes of Priest Wugen and the other martial art experts, there was nothing extraordinary with this kind of *qing gong* [lightness skill], but noticing that she was very young, yet her posture was very pleasing to the eye, they all cheered.

At first, when Wei Xiaobao knew the boat was about to sail, he was afraid that Shuang’er had already fallen into some evil people’s hands, and thus he was very anxious; although her martial art skill was strong, she was a young child after all. Not only that, she was gentle and refined by nature, and did not understand the way of the world. On the sea-going ship, she had nowhere to go, and would definitely get the worst of it. Moreover, realizing that Fang Yi was actually a Divine Dragon Cult’s disciple, he suddenly also realized that the boat with which they came to the island naturally belonged to the Cult. Now that he saw Shuang’er, he was very happy. He pulled her hands, but saw that her countenance looked wan and sallow, her eyes red and swollen, obviously she had been crying a lot. “Did they bully you?” he hastily asked.

“No, they … they didn’t,” Shuang’er replied, “I was only worrying about *Xianggong*. They … they locked me up.”

“Alright!” Wei Xiaobao said, “We are going home.”

Shuang’er said, “In here … there are a lot of poisonous snakes,” while saying that, “Wah!” Shuang’er burst into tears again.

Wei Xiaobao cast a glance toward Fang Yi; he remembered she led him walk into the forest and let him be bitten by the vipers. A good deal of artificial gestures, all kinds of sweet speech and honeyed words on the boat, everything was a hypocrisy; he could not help but was furious. Casting a hateful glance toward Fang Yi, he said, “Set sail!”

Aboard, the sailors weighed the anchor; ashore, the firecrackers went off, the people sending off their masters chorused, “Respectfully wishing White Dragon Envoy to win victory on raising the flag, to have instant success and will set up great merit for Jiaozhu!”

Taking advantage of the fair wind, the boat hoisted its sail and slowly left the Island. Everybody on the shore shouted, “With Jiaozhu’s treasured teaching always in our hearts …”

Wei Xiaobao thought, “If I did not know Miss Fang had already entered the Cult, I would have missed her all the time. This way, I have nothing to worry about her.” Yet when he recalled Fang Yi’s touching tender sentiments, he could not stop his heart from feeling melancholy.

He thought further, “How could those two enter Shen Long Jiao? It’s very strange. Ah, right, they were captured by Zhang *Laosan* and his men, Young Mistress Zhuang said she sent people to rescue them, apparently they failed, consequently they were forced to join Shen Long Jiao. Xiao Junzhu has taken Jiaozhu’s poison, it’s only natural that Miss Fang has also taken the poison. Um, if Miss Fang did not obey, she did not want to deceive me into coming to Divine Dragon Island, the poison in her will flare up and she die. Indeed she had no choice, so I can’t blame her. It’s just that this little mother’s skin [小娘皮 - see Chapter 10] was putting on an act and deceived her

husband without spending any effort at all; she is not a good person! Damn it, in the end, what is Shen Long Jiao up to? Although *laozi* has become the White Dragon Envoy, I am completely in the dark!”

Thinking that it was all because of Zhang *Laosan*, he mused, “I wonder which gate does this old fellow belong to? When in the future *Laozi* is back on the Divine Dragon Island, I will have him transferred to the White Dragon Gate, then I will have this old fellow’s buttocks flogged three hundred times every day.” He also thought, “I wonder if Zhang *Laosan* is on the Island? Most likely he does not dare to report to Jiaozhu that I am Xiao Guizi; otherwise, when Jiaozhu heard that he had already caught such an important person but then let him go, Jiaozhu would have chopped his head. He is an old fellow, not a pretty boy [lit. ‘little white face’], which Jiaozhu and Madame are going to kill anyway. If they found out that he had violated such matter, wouldn’t he be killed like, seventeen, eighteen times already? That’s right, Fat Toutuo did not dare to expose my trickery, Zhang Laosan also did not dare to expose my fraud[108]. There is one thing I do not understand, Madame loves ‘little white face’, that’s not so strange, but why does Jiaozhu also love them?” [Translator’s note: the part about ‘little white face’ does not exist in the 3rd edition]

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[1] Lit. Spirit Mound, Stepped Corridor, and Heavenly Pool, respectively.

[2] Paper lanterns supposedly invented by Zhuge Liang (Romance of the Three Kingdoms).

[3] Younger uncle (father’s younger brother), older uncle

(father’s older brother), grandpa (or father-in-law), respectively.

[4] From the dictionary: Laogong – 1. Husband (informal), 2. Eunuch.

[5] Together, 胡说八道 means ‘nonsense/rubbish’.

[6] Xiao Junzhu and Lao Junzhu are little and old princess, respectively. The 'fang' and 'yuan' of Fang Yi and Yuan Yi are ‘square’ and ‘round’, respectively.

[7] Shanhai Pass is the Eastern pass of the Great Wall.

[8] ‘Gao Fei Yuan Zhou’（高飞远走), Wei Xiaobao said, ‘Gao Zhou Yuan Fei’ (高走远飞).

[9] Wu, Liu, Qi and Ba are five, six, seven and eight, respectively. See Chapter 6.

[10] Orig. ‘bing tang hu lu’ – a common Chinese snack; candied fruits dipped in sugar syrup, usually on bamboo skewers.

[11] ‘Qian’ is one of the Eight Trigrams (Ba Gua), ‘Qing’ refers to either ‘Qing’ Dynasty, or simply ‘clear’ or ‘pure’.

Courtesy of Ace High: It’s better known as Gate of Heavenly Purity, which connects to the Palace of Heavenly Purity, the residence of the Emperor, by a raised walkway to its north. It is also the main gate of the Inner Court. In front of the gate, there is a courtyard which is 200 meters long from east to west and is 30 meters from north to south. This courtyard both separates the Outer Court and the Inner Court and integrates them.

[12] Zhonghe means ‘neutralize/counteract’, Taihe is the central pavilion of the Forbidden City, commonly called ‘Hall of Supreme Harmony’ in English.

Courtesy of Ace High: Hall of Complete Harmony (中和殿; Zhōng Hé Diàn) is used by the Emperor to prepare and rest before and during ceremonies. It is one of the three halls of the Outer Court and the smallest of the three.

Hall of Supreme Harmony (太和殿; Tài Hé Diàn) is the largest hall within the Forbidden Palace. In the Ming Dynasty, the Emperor held court here to discuss affairs of state. During the Qing Dynasty, Emperors held court far more frequently. As a result, the location was changed to the Inner Court, and the Hall of Supreme Harmony was only used for ceremonial purposes, such as coronations, investitures, and imperial weddings.

[13] Yizhou and Liangpi mean 'one boat' and 'two farts', respectively.

[14] His real name was Li Zicheng, a real historical character, the leader of peasant rebellion at the end of the Ming Dynasty, he called himself 'The Roaming King' (Chuang Wang).

[15] Orig. ‘mountain has a connecting pulse throughout like a dragon’, an idiom from fengshui, meaning the sequence of events, cause and effects, the whys and wherefores, where something comes from and where it goes … you get the idea.

[16] Guizhou and Ningxia, respectively. Here Mu Jianping said *Wang Yeye* (grandfather king).

[17] Chinese shawm, a double-reed woodwind instrument, similar to modern day Oboe.

[18] An old fashioned square table to seat eight people.

[19] Nujiang river, south of Tibet and northwest of Yunnan, the upper reaches of Salween river, forming border of Burma (Myanmar) and Thailand.

[20] Orig. ‘Lao di’ – old younger brother. Also in subsequent paragraphs. Liu Dahong always refer to Tian Di Hui people as ‘lao di’.

[21] Orig. Jing Cheng Zhili, *i.e.* Ming and Qing dynasty provinces directly administered by Beijing, including Beijing, Tianjin, most of Hebei, Henan, and part of Shandong.

[22] Lit. Old Master. The online text has ‘Laobobo’ – Old Uncle (someone older than one’s own father), or Grandpa, a polite form of address for old man.

[23] Lit. ‘scabies/skin disease dysentery little third’. Xiao Sanzi can also mean ‘the other man (or woman), someone who is romantically involved with married woman/man.

[24] I just want to point out that Wei Xiaobao’s list was a lot longer than this: paternal and maternal grandparents (yeye, nainai, waigong, waipo), maternal uncles and aunts and their spouses (yizhang, yimu, jiujiu, jiumu), paternal aunts and their husbands (guzhang, gumu), maternal cousins, male and female, younger and older (biaoge, biaodi, biaojie, biaomei). Interestingly, he did not mention other relatives from his father’s side (paternal uncles and their spouses and paternal cousins).

[25] Lit. ‘youth’; it is also a term of endearment to address one’s husband (or in this case, husband-to-be).

[26] Orig. ‘coveting Sichuan once Gansu has been seized’.

[27] Wearing green cap – one’s spouse is having an affair behind one’s back.

[28] Orig. 义薄云天. Only in formal Chinese does '薄' mean 'approach/reaches'; thus, it's very natural for Wei Xiaobao to interpret it as meaning 'thin/meager', which is what '薄' usually means. (Courtesy of Ren Wo Xing)

[29] Orig. ‘a thousand pounds hangs by a thread’.

[30] The battle of Chang Ban Po was one of the most famous battles in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, in large part due to the heroics of Liu Bei's general Zhao Yun, also known as Zhao Zilong. In the battle, Zhao Zilong slew Xiahou En [whom Wei Xiaobao called 'Xiaohou-something') and took the precious 'Qinggang Sword', which actually belonged to Cao Cao himself, from Xiaohou En's corpse. With the Qinggang Sword, his own spear, and while carrying Liu Bei's only son Liu Shan, Zhao Zilong charged in and out of Cao Cao's formations seven times in succession, slaying over 50 of Cao Cao's commanders, before finally being able to break through and escape with Liu Bei's child. Cao Cao, witnessing his valor, had ordered his archers not to shoot at Zhao Yun, hoping to take him alive and sway him to his own side. (Courtesy of Ren Wo Xing)

[31] Orig. 亲王贝勒 (qin wang bei lei) 亲王, meaning 'royal prince', and 贝勒, which is a Mongolian title which means much the same thing; i.e., a prince with blood ties to the royal family, usually a son of an Emperor. (Courtesy of Ren Wo Xing)

[32] Reminder: *Xiongdi* is a generic term for 'brother', as opposed to *Gege*, which is a term of endearment (sometimes

even carries romantic notion) to address a male older than oneself.

[33] *Jiejie* is the female counterpart of *Gege*. See note 18 above.

[34] Orig. Xiao Bai Lian - little white face.

[35] Chu – a kingdom during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States (722-221 BC), Qin – Qin dynasty (221-207 BC).

[36] Orig. 'coming out of the thatched cottage'.

[37] The peaches of immortality, kept by Xi Wangmu.

[38] Cheng Huang (Shing Wong) is a deity in Chinese mythology, a City God, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City_god

[39] Orig. 'hundreds of arteries and veins open up brightly'.

[40] Idiom 'to clasp the Buddha's feet without ever having to burn incense', meaning 'to profess devotion only when in trouble'.

[41] Orig. **千穿万穿**, 马屁不穿 [qian chuan wan chuan, ma pi bu chuan] - lit. ‘thousand times bore through, ten thousand times bore through; horse’s fart does not bore through’. Horse fart is an idiom for ‘flattery’ or ‘boot-licking’.

[42] Founding Emperor of the Ming Dynasty, with regnal name Hongwu.

[43] Yao (c. 2200 BC) – one of five legendary emperors of ancient China, Shun (c. 22nd century BC) – mythical sage and

leader, Yu (c. 21st century BC) – mythical leader who tamed the floods. Tang refers to King Tang of Shang (1675 BC -1646 BC) who was the first ruling king of the Shang dynasty in Chinese history. He overthrew Jie, the last ruler of the Xia dynasty. Tang's reign was regarded as a good one by the Chinese. He lowered taxes and the conscription rate of soldiers. His influence spread to the Yellow River, and many outlying tribes became vassal states. (Courtesy of Ace High)

[44] Orig. 'kept hoodwinked inside a drum'.

[45] Reminder: 'wu' and 'liu' means 'five' and 'six', respectively.

[46] Orig. 'yi pai liang san' – one strike, two parts, meaning separation/breaking up of marriage or business partnership.

[47] Door bolts in those days are long pieces of wood placed across the door.

[48] Xiao Bao means little treasure, Si Bao means dead treasure.

[49] Yuhua - Rain Flower Pavilion. The pavilion here is usually two-storied. Baohua – maintaining/guarding splendor (different 'hua' character from Yuhua). Fujian – Established Prosperity, same character as Fujian Province.

[50] Orig. 'Has the water flowed?' [是走了水吗] Many people consider saying 失火 [catch a fire] a taboo so they use 走水 instead. (Courtesy of Forgot Pasword)

[51] Yaodao is actually a type of saber commonly used by government official. The word 'dao' itself means 'saber'.

Following Pokit's example in 'Smiling Proud Wanderer', I repeat the word 'saber' just to clarify it.

[52] I thought I'd better clarify this: two paragraph above (...did not say anything for a long time), the original character was 良久 (liang jiu), hence I translated it as 'a long time'; in this paragraph, however, the original was 好半晌 (hao ban shang). I'll leave it to your own discretion whether you want to interpret it as a literal 12-hour period or not. Just FYI, when Jin Yong meant specific period of time, he usually used 'sichen', or something like 'the time needed to eat rice' or 'burning incense stick' or something like that.

[53] Buttoned mandarin jacket of the Qing Dynasty.

[54] Orig. 'ten thousand matters are greatly propitious'.

[55] A *kang* is a heatable brick bed common in northern China.

[56] Jiejie – older sister, Gugu – auntie, to be precise: paternal aunt.

[57] From the dictionary: 'black inn' is an inn that kills and robs guests (esp. in traditional fiction).

[58] In Chinese, 'forty-two' is written as 'four', 'ten' and 'two'.

[59] Li Zicheng, the leader of peasant rebellion at the end of the Ming Dynasty, he called himself Chuang Wang - 'The Roaming King'. The character 'Chuang' (闖) means to rush *to charge* to dash *to break through* to temper oneself (through battling hardships).

[60] Lit. 'great' shifu, in this case, 'grand master', shifu of

shifu.

[61] My dictionary has an additional definition: terrain that looks like a dragon.

[62] Lit. 'eat inside, cling outside'; it is a term meant to refer to someone who benefits/is raised by one person, but instead helps outsiders (usually, the enemy). (Courtesy of Ren Wo Xing)

[63] My dictionary has this explanation to this phrase: Confucian ban on widow remarrying.

[64] Dictionary says Taisu is God of the year/archaic name for planet Jupiter/someone who is the most powerful in an area.

[65] Lit. Taoist priest of Mount Mao (mount reeds), Maoshan is a school of Taoism that is well known for its "supernatural" rituals, *e.g.* exorcism *etc.* (Courtesy of CFT)

[66] rice dumplings wrapped in leaves

[67] Referring to wooden fish used by Buddhist in prayers.

[68] Lit. little woman/female. This is the counterpart of *Xiaoren* (humble/little one), *i.e.* she was placing herself in a lower position compared to the person she was talking to.

[69] The word ‘xiao yatou’ means a girl or a servant girl (used deprecatingly, but sometimes also as a term of endearment).

[70] Lake Tai, near Wuxi City, bordering Jiangsu and Zhejiang, one of China’s largest fresh water lake.

[71] Shuang’er said ‘wenzi yu’, Wei Xiaobao thought she said ‘wenzi rou’ (different characters, sound alike).

[72] Fuping county, Baoding, Hebei. Zhili – see Chapter 9.

[73] Orig. *biaodi*, younger male cousin from mother's side.

[74] Put together, 'wang ba' means tortoise *cuckold* (insult with the flavor of bastard, son of a bitch).

[75] From the dictionary: Usually refers to Amitabha Buddha's Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss (Sukhavati in Sanskrit).

[76] Lit. 'old cassock', the term used by Buddhist monks to refer to themselves.

[77] The main hall of a Buddhist temple where the main image of veneration is located.

[78] Fashi means ‘one who has mastered the sutras’.

[79] Here we have ‘jushi’ again (see also Chapter 9, and the discussion surrounding it), lit. “resident scholar’.

[80] Hushuo Badao means rubbish/nonsense, with the character ‘ba’ means ‘eight’. Literal translation is: random talk eight ways. Jiudao means ‘nine ways’.

[81] Vajra/vajrapani, Buddha's warrior attendant. Toutuo, Buddhist monk who do not shave his head.

[82] Orig. 'chuanfa shifu' - master who pass on Buddhism doctrines to his disciples.

[83] Xuanzang (602-664) Tang dynasty Buddhist monk and translator who travelled to India (629-645).

[84] The Monkey King and the pig-like character with a muck-

rake as a weapon, both are characters in the novel Journey to the West.

[85] Another character in the novel Journey to the West. Shancai Hong Hai'er literally means 'good/virtuous/benevolent Red Boy.

[86] Qi Tian Da Sheng – the self proclaimed title of the Monkey King.

[87] Xing means 'to walk/go/travel, to perform/capable of/competent', Chi means 'imbecile, sentimental, stupid, foolish', Dian means 'fall forwards, inverted, jolt'.

[88] 'Xiaobao' - little/young treasure, 'Laobao' - old treasure.

[89] Orig. Pang Zunzhe – fat 'honored sir', can be referring to a person of higher status or seniority, or a Buddhist monk

[90] Ye - business/estate/property, Dou - fight or bucket, but could also refer to bei dou - big dipper constellation.

[91] Gou, mao and wugui mean dog, cat, and turtle, respectively. Reminder: Ping Xi Wang means 'king who pacifies the west'.

[92] Emperor Taizong, second emperor of Tang Dynasty, reigned 626-649.

[93] From the dictionary: Li Jing (570-649 AD), Tang Dynasty general and purported author of 'Duke Li of Wei answering Emperor Taizong of Tang', one of the Seven Military Classics of ancient China.

[94] He was awarded the imperial surname of Li by Gao Zu of

Tang. Li Ji's fiefdom was called Yīng (英). 国公 (national duke) was a title awarded to the ruling clan as opposed to 民公 ('commoner' (non imperial) duke). [Courtesy of Ace High]

[95] Orig. 'Zhen Ren' - lit. 'real man', a term of respect to address a Taoist priest.

[96] Lord of profound heaven, major Taoist deity.

[97] From Wikipedia: Demoted Empress Suoerna, from the Borjigit clan, niece of Xiao Zhuang Grand Imperial Dowager Empress, demoted in 1653.

[98] Referring to administrative division of China during earliest dynasties, or ancient China.

[99] Xizhimen neighborhood of Beijing, the main northwest gate of Beijing.

[100] Ru gui means ‘as if returning’.

[101] Xidan neighborhood of central Beijing.

[102] Lit. stone drum, early form of Chinese characters inscribed in stone, from spring and autumn period.

[103] The first of 10 heavenly stems and the first of 12 earthly branches of the Chinese calendar, a cycle of 60 years. The last Jiazi year was 1984, by a quick calculation, since the Tang Dynasty was 618-907, the Jiazi during that period was the year 664.

[104] I have difficulty translating this. A 'men' (lit. gate) can be translated as 'school (of thought), (religious) sect, family, or house', 'zhangmen' is the head of a sect. I believe it was

translated as 'headmaster, chief or sect leader' before; however, the 'shi' at the end means 'envoy' or 'messenger', as in 'left or right emissary' in the Ming Cult. Therefore, 'zhangmenshi' literally means 'emissary of the sect leader'. However, since Divine Dragon Cult is technically a 'sect', and Black Dragon in this case is a 'sect' within a Cult, I find the term 'emissary of the sect leader' is not technically accurate.

[105] Orig. ‘not knowing to whom the deer falls’. See also Chapter 1.

[106] Shouxing is the god of longevity.

[107] The original word means ‘ring’. What came into my mind was Sun Wukong’s headband from Journey to the West. (From Wikipedia: Guanyin understood that the monkey would be hard to control, and therefore gave Xuanzang a gift from the Buddha: a magical headband which, once Sun Wukong was tricked into putting it on, could never be removed. With a special chant, the band would tighten and cause unbearable pain to the monkey's head. To be fair, she also gave Sun Wukong three special hairs, which could be used in dire emergencies. Under Xuanzang's supervision, Sun Wukong was allowed to journey to the West.) Please bear in mind that this is only my impression, not in Jin Yong’s original text.

[108] There is a play of words here, the original says, ‘Fat Toutuo … trickery [西洋镜 - xi yang jing, literally means ‘western world mirror’], Zhang Laosan … fraud [东洋镜 – dong yang jing, lit. ‘eastern world mirror’]’.